

A New Year's Day Cliché

Message – A New Year's Day Cliché: What Does 2021 look like?

Psalm 13, Philippians 1:9, 1 Peter 2:2, 2 Peter 1:5-8, Ephesians 3:17, 1 John 5:3,
Romans 8:18

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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The sermon is preceded by solemn, serious, foreboding music on the keyboards, as Andrew reads these words from Psalm 13. More than reads, he, actually almost yells these heart-wrenching verses....

¹ How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ² How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

*³ Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,⁴ and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed"; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken. (**Psalm 13:1-4**)*

The mood softens as the keyboard shifts to the calming melody of "It is Well (With My Soul" by Horatio Spafford)

When peace like a river attendeth my way
When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say
It is well, it is well with my soul
It is well (it is well), With my soul (with my soul)
It is well, it is well with my soul

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come
Let this blest assurance control
That Christ (yes, He has) has regarded my helpless estate
And has shed His own blood for my soul
It is well (it is well), With my soul (with my soul)
It is well, it is well with my soul

My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought
My sin, not in part, but the whole
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!
It is well (it is well), With my soul (with my soul)
It is well, it is well with my soul

And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend
Even so, it is well with my soul!
It is well (it is well), With my soul (with my soul)
It is well, it is well with my soul

Andrew's voice, now soothing, gains in intensity and affirmation as he reads the concluding verses of Psalm 13:

⁵ But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.⁶ I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.
(Psalm 13:5-6)

Welcome to St. Paul's Church, my name is Andrew Bible and I am the Media-Technical Director at St. Paul's and I want to talk to you about 2020:

This is quite possibly the worst year I've ever been in...

- A year where I've said the word unprecedented, an unprecedented amount of times!
- A year where my penchant for hoarding hand sanitizer and toilet paper is... normal.
- A year where people have never been more divided; and hatred has taken center stage.
- A year where I've hit all-time spiritual lows and all-time spiritual highs... in the same week!
- A year where my human interaction is relegated to a tiny camera in a dark basement.
- A year that I'd rather not live through again... I think... because on the flip side, *this is the greatest thing to ever happen to my dog!* Nobody leaves the house anymore!!! And she thinks it's because of her!

Can anyone relate to Psalm 13, which opened our time together today?

It starts off quite intensely and verse 2 says exactly how I've been feeling lately

² How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

All day long!!! It's so easy to feel this way when I'm alone with my thoughts for too long. King David felt this way too... and often...

But, in this psalm, it ends with hope.

⁵ But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.⁶ I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

I often wonder about the amount of time that passed in David's life to have him going from utter despair to being able to speak of hope, joy, peace, and love. I'd like to be able to schedule that on my calendar if I could!

2020 has outright stunk and I also wonder when I am going to stop feeling the way I do.....But, -

**...in the midst of everything going on,
God has taken the ministry of St. Paul's
and dealt us a bountiful hand.**

Listen to this list of organizations and ministries that have been supported by us during a global pandemic:

- Cornerstone Youth Center
- Elizabethtown Child Care Center
- Adult & Teen Challenge
- Red Bird Mission
- UMCOR
- Teenhope
- North Star Initiative
- Jewel David Ministries
- The United Methodist Women
- Operation Christmas Child
- The Elizabethtown Fire Department
- The ECHOS Winter Shelter.... right below my feet

There might be more, so I apologize to anyone I may have missed.

Now, I don't read out this list in order to say proudly, "Yaasy! St.Pauls, look what we did! No, I say it to show what God has done with us.

In the midst of us feeling like there is no hope, God said "Ahem, I'm not done with you yet! And, look back carefully over what I've done with and through you!"

That's why we can never forget how this Psalm ends

***⁵ But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.***

***⁶ I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me. (Psalm 13:5-6)***

Because no matter how low I'm feeling, God can still use that, and he's proved it time and time again!

Wow, there's my spiritual high for the week, but these low feelings aren't going to go away even knowing what I just said... that's why I wish I knew how long it took King David to get past his sorrow.

You see originally, John Messick and I volunteered to do this service to make things a bit easier with less moving parts as there was so much planned for Christmas week. But the hand we were dealt changed and we're virtual only for now. So, you're either watching this online or reading it in my sermon notes. For now, there are no 'live', in-person services.

And just as I say that, my spiritual high starts to dip because I am human... you are human.

So, the grand question on everyone's minds is

What does 2021 hold for us?

John Messick plays the reflective contemporary song "Build My Life" (written by Matt Redman, Pat Barrett, Brett Younker, Karl Martin, Kirby Kaple, K.A. Martin)

Worthy of every song we could ever sing
Worthy of all the praise we could ever bring
Worthy of every breath we could ever breathe; We live for You....

Jesus, the name above every other name
Jesus, the only one who could save
Worthy of every breath we could ever breathe; We live for You....

Holy, there is no one like you
There is none besides you
Open up my eyes in wonder
And show me who you are and fill me
With your heart and lead me
In your love to those around me
Take me in your arms, Leave me in Your Love

And I will build my life upon your love, it is a firm foundation
And I will put my trust in you alone
And I will not be shaken
And I will put my trust in you alone
And I, I will not be shaken

2021... Again, what does that year hold for us?

Honestly, I have no idea! But, if this was a normal year, I'd make up some silly New Year's resolution that I have no intention of keeping past January 10th give or take a few days....And let's be honest here:

- I was never going to go to a gym
- I was never going to shave more often or better
- I'm just not going to stop opening the refrigerator door when I walk past it, especially when I don't need anything out of it... sorry honey...

According to the History channel, the ancient Babylonians were the first ones to start this tradition of making resolutions, some 4000 years ago. They believed that if they kept their promises, the gods would look with favor upon them, but if they didn't, they would fall out of favor and bad things would happen. I'm sure glad that God doesn't treat his people this way because I'd fail immediately.

For whatever reason we've kept this tradition alive. To some of us it's a very real motivator, for others, like me, it's a fun joke to share.

But, what if this coming year, we do something different. The mantra of 2020. But for real, instead of creating an individual resolution, let's go all in together. If we're truly "In this together," let's resolve, right here, right now; say it with me...

My 2021 resolution is to love God more.

That's only three words, "**Love God More.**" It can't be that hard, right? Well, this is my sixth time attempting that resolution....and just ask my small group how good of a job I've done. I'd say a C, maybe a C+. The problem is, I never let anyone hold me accountable for this as we just move on to the next thing. But this time, I want all of you to hold me accountable and I want to hold all of you accountable!

I truly believe that this year God has prepared us to do this: Back in April and May we learned what it was like to be **Exiles**, stuck in our homes. As we navigated those waters, it became evident that we were and still are going through a **Test**. A brief reprieve of that Test taught us that we are **Better Together**. (by the way these are the titles of sermon series we've gone through since the pandemic hit, and you can request manuscripts of any or all of these past sermons).

And I have no desire to go back to the beginning because feeling like an Exile is a route that leads to spiritual death and this thought that God can't act because we're stuck inside. As much as I want to take credit for this idea, it's not new. In **Philippians 1:9**, Paul prays

⁹And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more...

So, how do we do this, it sounds so simple? Well, my own experience tells a different story. But I've come to find there are two definite ways... Paul continues his prayer in Philippians; he prayed that their love would

...that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment...

Our love for God grows when we increase in real knowledge. But what is real knowledge?

Peter tells us to

...long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (1 Peter 2:2).

Growing in the word of God, he says

...in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:5-8).

- To love God more, we must grow through His word. The more we grow through God's word, the more we love God as we're "*rooted and grounded in love*" (**Ephesians 3:17**).
- There's a lot there that I have to work on.
- See "Real knowledge" in this verse results in spiritual maturity as we grow through God's word.

This has nothing to do with being what society would classify as being intelligent, I don't care what your IQ is. This is about seeking God through what we were given,

the Bible; hence “real knowledge.” Based on what I see in the world today, I think that we’re missing the mark on this. We don’t spend enough time researching and discovering more about what’s in the Bible. Instead, we just take what we hear, assume that it’s always right, and then twist it to cover what we want anyway. Sound familiar? That way doesn’t encourage any kind of love.

See, I definitely encourage you to fact check what I say and any others you might be listening to. I certainly don’t get into the Word as much as I should, but when I do, I discover so much more. God’s message doesn’t end when the sermon does. That one seems reasonable, right? So, what is the other way we can love God more? In John’s first letter he says:

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. (1 John 5:3)

Nothing He commands of us is burdensome... I have to admit, I had disagreed with this statement for a long time because I felt that there were so many things that I was being commanded to do that were *completely* burdensome. But, as I studied and thought about this, my attitude was always the problem.

The second way is Obedience with a Positive Attitude. Who here with us reading today has a positive attitude about serving God in the COVID era? Inside secret here, John and I are not always so happy about the things we do behind the scenes, we edit those parts out. But see, all I ever hear about is what we can’t do. We all know that God is working, I gave a big list earlier, but still the excuses... “it’s haaaaard, I can’t do it!”

Yes, you can! It’s so easy with the way the world is today to keep a negative outlook. Don’t let any human dictate that for you. Because how often, has our attitude gotten in the way of God’s work? Despite our shortcomings, God keeps on coming back to use us.

So again, to love God more, we need to:

1. Increase our “Real Knowledge”

- Read your Bible, but don’t do it just because I said so or because it’s the “Right Thing to do.” You won’t get very far.
- Don’t be random with this either.
- Start by fact checking what any of us say and do here at St. Paul’s and then try to expand upon that message.
- Then try a specific question and look for the answers. There are so many resources online to help.
- Then find another question and continue down those rabbit holes.

2. Obey Him with a Positive Attitude

- Not only will a positive attitude help with whatever God wants you to do, but it will change your entire outlook on everything.
- Who likes being around a negative person? No one!
- This doesn’t mean you have to be happy about everything, but it will leave your heart open for whatever God has for you.
- This is especially critical now as we continue to battle this pandemic.

Everyone has a common goal, but the journey will be oh so different for each of us. That is why it is paramount that we hold each other accountable and check up on each other's progress. So, find a friend or twelve to keep checking in on because whether we're together in person or on the Facebook group, we need each other to be successful. This resolution is attainable because nothing God commands is a burden

Now, why should we do this at all? Well, I'll answer that question with another question... What would change, if you loved God more? I have no clue, but you'll never find out unless you try. And honestly, is there anyone and I mean anyone who doesn't need to love God more? You could be doing great right now, but there's always room for more love.

I leave this last verse to help motivate you:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us **(Romans 8:18)**

So now, let's pray for 2021.

Lord, we are quite uncertain about 2021, but that's ok, You are in charge! You loved us so much that Jesus was born to die. Thus, we are saved! We pray that we can learn to love You more and to do those things you'd have for us. Thank you, God! Amen!!!

Love God More! We can do this church!!! God has put us here together for a reason. So, let that motivate you into 2021. Have a great week and a Happy New Year!!!