

Year B, 2nd Sunday after Christmas
January 3, 2021
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“I will turn their mourning into joy,

I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.”

A very merry 10th day of Christmas to you! I hope your Christmas has been as lovely as possible. We’ve had a good Christmas, complicated at times to be sure, and good. We still have two days of our winter feast left before we move into our Ordinary Time interlude beginning on Wednesday with the Feast of the Epiphany. We’ll have a noontime Mass for that auspicious day. So in the meantime, it’s a feast, so live it up!

And also a happy New Year, a very happy New Year to you. At the top of my sermons I always note the liturgical day (today is Year B, 2nd Sunday after Christmas Day) and the date. January 3, 2021. That was the first time I have written the numbers 2-0-2-1 in that order. Thank you Jesus!

I am not a night owl but I had trouble falling asleep on New Year’s eve and I was awake at the turn of the year. I was watching something and kept flipping up to the clock on the computer as the midnight hour approached. 11:47... 11:56... and then 12:03... Nothing changed. Windy and the girls were still asleep. The chickens, ducks and our brand new Christmas goats were still snug and cozy in our little barn. The moon shone just as bright as it turned 2021 as it did when it was still 2020... nothing changed, and yet, everything is different. Or it could be. Might be. For the love of all that is good and beautiful and holy, it better be!

What we are good at, church that is, is making meaning of things. Discerning where God is in the goings on of our hearts, in our relationships with each other, in our relationship with God in God’s own self, in the world within which we live. That is what we do with all of the scriptural, liturgical, theological and pastoral resources we have, make meaning of the world we live in and share with God and the rest of this brilliant Creation.

We are in a new year, thanks be to God, but our problems haven’t followed the old calendar into the recycle bin. (BTW, it is ok not to recycle 2020 calendars. Feel free to reuse them to light your next fire in the wood stove or line the bird cage or train the puppy). The transition into 2021 is like winter: even though the light is already lasting longer and Spring gets closer with each passing day, it will keep getting colder for the next few months before that trajectory changes. Even though

the light is at the end of our tunnel, the darkest days of the pandemic and its economic consequences may very well be ahead of us. God willing the political chaos of the past years few years is almost over, but who knows... While things are different, it being a new year, we have a ways to go before things actually change.

Although we are good at making meaning of things, it can be hard to make meaning of big situations, of epic moments when they are very fresh or are still happening. We can make enough meaning in order to live. We do that all the time. We can make enough meaning to look ahead, to set a course, to discern what we might need in the time to come. We do that all the time as well. But we don't have, I think, the perspective to cogently, coherently or comprehensively reflect on this past year, not yet. Too much of it is still happening, still unresolved, we are still in the thick of too much of it. Lord have mercy.

So let's look ahead. A priest I know has a practice at New Years of choosing a verse of scripture to ponder in her heart for the year. She writes it on a little slip of paper and sticks it on her bathroom mirror, next to the speedometer in her car, and tapes it to the frame of her computer screen. She includes it in her prayers, daily, returning to it throughout the year, praying on, holding it as an object of mediation to contemplate, to inspire, discern, keep as a way point on her journey or as one of those floating cushions like you used to sit on in a canoe. I am not good with things like that, keeping a theme or practice like that at the front of my mind, but I am going to try it this year. I don't know how much has changed as we live into 2021, but I am going to try to do things differently, or at least, God willing, better than I have been.

Searching the Bible for that passage or couplet from the psalms, if you are like most Episcopalians, can be a daunting task. So this morning, I am going to prime the pump a bit, offer a few verses of scripture that suggest themes that might be fitting for the coming year. If that sounds like a terrible idea, that's fine, just sit back and bask in the Word of God. If it sounds like a good idea, these verses are included on the last page of the bulletin.

For new Energy Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. - *Isaiah 60:1*

Rejoice! O come, let us sing to the Lord; *
let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation! - *Psalms 95:1*

Thanksgiving On this day the Lord has acted; we will rejoice and be glad in it. - *Psalms 118:24*

For repentance Rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil. - *Joel 2:13*

New Possibilities: I can do all things through him who strengthens me. - *Philippians 4:13*

No worries: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” - *Matthew 6:25-33*

New Plans: For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart...
Jeremiah 29: 11-13

New Purpose: ...for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
 righteousness, justice, and equity;
to teach shrewdness to the simple,
 knowledge and prudence to the young—
let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
 and the discerning acquire skill... – *Proverbs 1:3-5*

New Prudence: If you would only keep silent, that would be your wisdom! - *Job 13:5*

New Wisdom:
The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,
 and whatever else you get, get insight.
Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;
 she will honour you if you embrace her.
She will place on your head a fair garland;
 she will bestow on you a beautiful crown. – *Proverbs 4:7-9*

Comfort: ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’ - *Matthew 11:28-30*

New Insight: For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

- *1 Corinthians 1.18*

Renewed Peace: Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. - *John 14.27*

Hope: The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. - *John 1:5*

Abide: Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. - *John 15.4*

I hope that maybe that is helpful. Or there are a million other verses to choose from (well, not a million, there are 31,000 or so, depending on the version). I am thinking about that verse from St. John's gospel, "Abide in me as I abide in you." There is a lot to that little word, Abide. If this practice resonates, I encourage you to do something like this, something to keep something new, some new direction, some new frame or lens through which to see this new year, this new world emerging as the old one perishes before our eyes.

We've come a long way. We have a long way to go. Thanks be to God for Emmanuel, God is with us, to the end of the age. AMEN.