

THE NEW YEAR: A TIME FOR HOPE

(01/01/12)

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 42
Romans 8:28, 31-32, 35-39
Matthew 28:16-20

“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Mt. 28:20)

When you were a child, did you ever close your eyes and make believe you were blind? I remember closing my eyes and feeling my way alongside a picket fence, one hand brushing the fence and the other groping out in front of me so I wouldn't run into anything. When I came to the end of the fence, I would proceed with one foot on the sidewalk and the other on the grass to make sure I wouldn't wander out into the street. Even as an adult, from time to time I have imagined what it would be like to be blind, what sort of life I would lead and what sort of adjustments I would have to make.

I notice that I pay particular attention to blind people as they feel their way down the sidewalk with a cane. There is something strange about a blind person. There is a certain type of sympathy that is evoked for a person who cannot see. How often have you heard someone say (or perhaps said yourself) "I could take it if I lost an arm or a leg, even if I lost my hearing, but I would never be able to adjust to being blind"?

To be blind is to be cut off in a radical way from the world around you, unable to see what's going on, unable to see what lies ahead. There is a tragic loneliness that goes with being blind, a feeling of being thrown back on yourself, cut off from the world and other people except insofar as they choose to enter your world.

The blind person is strange, but strange in a way with which we can all identify. I believe this is what we do -- we identify with the blind person. That is why our feelings become caught up in his/her situation, his/her life so easily.

We are all different. We are all strange. We are all peculiar, all individuals. We all fear the loneliness we all share, the loneliness of being separate and distinct. We all fear becoming dependent, being thrown on the mercy of others because we know how

rarely we have made the extra effort to bring the different or the alienated into our world.

We are not that different from the blind person. We share a common life and common goals. We thrill to the same hopes and cower before the same dragons. Most of all, we are forced to act on insufficient knowledge in very important areas of our life. We constantly find ourselves in the position of having to commit ourselves financially, emotionally, and even spiritually without being able to foresee the consequences.

Think about the matter of spirituality. With very limited knowledge, without knowing all the facts, and also knowing that religious "facts" are difficult to come by, we commit ourselves to a certain God. We take what Kierkegaard called "the leap of faith" and then proceed to build our life around an unseen God, inviting this God to guide and direct our life. In so many parts of our lives we are the blind leading the blind.

Perhaps this is why we are especially interested in blind people -- because in their uncertain gait, in their need to grope and to trust, we unconsciously recognize a symbol of our own uncertain process toward an unpredictable future.

As with a blind person, we cannot see what lies ahead. We cannot see what life has in store for us or for our church in 2012, for we are not in control of our destiny. If we believe we can structure our life so tightly, can plan our life so well, that we will not be surprised by events in the year to come, we are really only fooling ourselves. We do not know what the future, what even the year ahead holds in store for us.

I don't have to mention examples because we all have our own, examples of things that happened to us or to our families this past year that we could not possibly have foreseen, which we could not or would not have planned, which we were not able to prevent. Think about what happened to you and to your family this past year. Some of these experiences may have changed your life in a radical way. The chances are you are not the same person in the same life situation you were a year ago today.

In the year ahead, some people will be able to cope with the situations that will confront them, and some will not. Whether it will be a birth or a death, a marriage or a divorce, a new job or the loss of a job, a change in health or some difficult decision we will be called upon to make, some of us will be able to make the adjustment and some of us won't. When 2012 comes to an end, I believe we will find that we have been shaped most deeply not only by the events of the year, but by our attitude, by our response to life as we experienced it.

If we are to create a healthy attitude toward the future, we have to abandon the notion that we are in almost complete control of our lives.

In ancient times people worshipped a divine power called Fate, a factor in life that was believed to be even more powerful than the gods. Modern people still cling to this belief as evidenced by superstitious rituals that attempt to influence chance factors in their lives. In any case, as the ancients knew, chance or accident plays a large part in our lives. Everything that happens to us cannot be attributed to the will of God. A freak accident or unforeseen illness can bring us to our knees.

This misleading though prevalent notion -- that we are in control of our destiny is there to fill a gap, a gap that has been left by the absence of hope.

As we noted during our Advent reflections, from a Christian perspective hope is not the same as desire. Hope does not mean, "I want." Hope is much closer to what we would call trust. Hope for the future is built on the conviction that we are not alone, and that in the last analysis we are not dependent only on our own resources. Hope for the future is built on the trust that the living God, the God who became flesh, incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, that God who shares our life is trustworthy.

Hope is not a fantasy of the future. It is the conviction God loves us, cares for us and tries to unfold our lives in accordance with an inner plan. Christian hope is not the same as believing that everything will work out or that everything will be great in the

year to come. It is the faith that nothing, no matter how painful, can destroy us in the sense of damaging our relationship with that God who dwells within.

If we look at some of the people in the Bible whose lives were grounded in their personal relationship with God, we find that their lives weren't different from ours in the sense of having had fewer troubles or misfortunes. Their lives were different because of the way they handled the events of their lives, how these events shaped their soul, how these experiences shaped them into the people they became.

The disciples did not have an easy life before they met Jesus, and their life was certainly not any easier after they experienced his call. However, when they faced persecution and even execution we find no trace of bitterness or despair. They were able to handle whatever life brought their way because their lives were built around something greater than themselves. Because they trusted God, they lived out the hope and the conviction that, as the apostle Paul promised, all would ultimately turn out in accordance with God's will.

As we stand poised at the gate of the year, and as we always stand poised at the gate of our future, what would the psalmist say to us?

The psalmist would tell us there will be times when we will be discouraged, when our soul will be cast down or disquieted. There will be times in the year to come when we will wonder why God is not removing our suffering from us.

When we feel this way, the psalmist tells us to remember. Remember how God has been with us in the past, even in times of physical and emotional sickness. The psalmist tells us that our hope is built on our past experiences, and on remembering.

As we stand poised at the gate of the year, and as we always stand poised at the gate of our future, what would the apostle Paul say to us?

Paul would tell us that the meaning of life is not the avoidance of suffering. The meaning of life is not the increase of pleasure and the decrease of pain. Paul would tell us that suffering is an important part of life, and that suffering will be an important part

of our life in the year to come. The important thing is not to avoid suffering, but how our sufferings will shape our very soul. If we respond to our sufferings with faith, they will lead us to find both our hope and our grounding in God.

What was the foundation of this hope for Paul? It lay in his experience of the risen Christ and the conviction that nothing in all creation: hardship, distress, even death itself can separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord.

We meet today on the very first day of the New Year. We have not passed this way before. We are all blind, blind to the future, to what will come to pass in the year ahead. If we trust only in ourselves, we are building our house on sand.

We need to listen to the psalmist when he tells us to remember.

We need to listen to the apostle Paul when he tells us that we shouldn't view suffering as an injustice, but we should enter into the future knowing that God is always with us. This is the kind of hope that can help us face the uncertainties of the year to come with confidence.

Finally, we need to listen to Jesus, who assures us of his loving, caring, healing presence when he tells us what he tells both his disciples and us: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Let us now be with our Lord in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, and let us open our hearts to his presence in the year to come.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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