

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

2 Peter 3:1-17

January 1, 2023

New Year's Day

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND FOREVER

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Sometime in early 1999, the session appointed the “Millennium Celebration Group,” chaired by N.H. Carter, and charged the members with making plans to welcome the year 2000 and to mark the third millennium with events throughout the year 2000. At the April 20, 1999 stated session meeting, N.H. Carter gave a report and the session approved the following events: a New Year's Eve worship and communion service on Friday, December 31, 1999 at 11:30 p.m.; an intergenerational gathering and celebration at the church on January 1, 2000 for fun and games, worship and a pot-luck meal of traditional New Year's dishes; worship on Sunday, January 2, 2000 with communion and special music; a Scottish Heritage event with the St. Andrews College Pipe Band and a Kirkin' of the Tartans in February or early March; a Cinco de Mayo (May 5) Cultural Exchange celebration with Hispanic Christians, to be coordinated by Rev. Eduardo Moreno; Kirkwood Sunday, September 17, 2000; and a Homecoming celebration on Sunday, October 15, 2000.

The Millennium Celebration Group thought it was important that we gather for worship on Friday night, December 31, 1999 at 11:30 p.m. as the third millennium was ushered in. On the Wednesday before our New Year's Eve worship service, there was a front-page article in the *Wilmington Morning Star*, in which Rabbi James Apple of Wilmington's Temple of Israel was quoted that he had been telling his congregation, “When your children and your grandchildren ask you, ‘Where were you on December 31, 1999?’ I think the correct answer is, ‘I was in the temple, the synagogue, worshipping. That's where you belong.’” Rabbi Apple said, “I'm very serious about this, because you're making a statement to your children or your grandchildren that religion is important.”

We gathered in this sanctuary on December 31, 1999 for “A Service of Worship, Assurance, and Hope for God's Future on New Year's Eve 1999.” The welcome to the New Year's Worship was from Psalm 100:5: “For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” The Old Testament lesson was Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (the same as this morning). The New Testament lesson was 2 Peter 3:8-10 (almost the same as this morning). My sermon title was “Does Anybody Really Know What Time It is?” We celebrated the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper and lit candles. We heard this exhortation from the Apostle Paul in Romans 13: “Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” We were dismissed into a new year — now 2000! — with these words: “May Almighty

God bless, preserve, and keep us, this night and forevermore. Amen. Bless the Lord. The Lord's name be praised."

Do you remember what else was happening on Friday, December 31, 1999? In the bottom left-hand corner of the front page of the San Diego *Union-Tribune*, the headline read, "Little glitches more likely than big Y2K bug bites." However, another news source asked on that day, "New year's evil? Federal agents are scrambling to stop a new Y2K worry: terror." Another headline on the *Union-Tribune's* front page that New Year's Eve informed that "Feds detain dozens in terrorism sweep." But the main headline of the feature article read, "Russian leader Yeltsin resigns the presidency." The third paragraph said, "Looking pale and grim in a speech on national television, Yeltsin said he had turned over his powers to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, his preference to succeed him as president."

As they say, "the more things change, the more they stay the same." Apparently, they thought the same thing almost 2,000 years ago. Remember how Peter warned the faithful, "First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!' (2 Peter 3:3-4)

Can you remember the anticipation as we approached January 1, 2000? Yes, there was the uncertainty about "Y2K," but there was also a sense of excitement and hope that the new millennium would somehow be different. And yet, here we are twenty-three years later and the headlines remain the same. You don't even have to change some of the names! It's enough to make even believers wonder, "Where is the promise of his coming? All things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!"

Here's a section of the sermon I preached at the New Year's Eve worship service on the cusp of the third millennium (at least as reckoned by Eastern Standard Time — it was already 2000 in many places around the world, and still early in the evening in places in our own country): "According to the reckoning of time in 2 Peter 3:8, it's as if the birth of Christ 2,000 years ago was just a couple of days ago in God's sight. Which is another way of saying why we have gathered here tonight in worship as the clock strikes midnight — to say again that we believe that God is sovereign, that we believe God will be faithful to his promises, and that we believe God's purpose for his people and all of creation will be fulfilled.

"In the article from Wednesday's paper, Rev. Mike Queen of First Baptist Church in Wilmington was quoted, 'I think one of the interesting things is people have been looking back at the century more in a reflective, contemplative mood than I hear people looking to the future in anticipation.' Surely we have the opportunity to do both. This change of year, from 1999 to 2000, certainly calls for serious contemplation of our past — to celebrate our accomplishments as the human race and, I hope, to learn from our mistakes. But even more important, we gather tonight, intentionally, to look to the future, to God's future, to our future as God's people, with confidence and assurance in the promises of God."

On New Year's Eve 2019, the joke was that "tomorrow everyone will be able to see 20/20!" Well, we know how 2020 turned out, don't we? At the end of 2020, people were saying, "Good riddance! Let's hope 2021 is a better year." But the challenges continued, primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A year ago, people were longing for better things as we rang out 2021 and welcomed 2022. But this year has brought its own set of problems and challenges. More than one person has said to me, "I'm ready to see 2022 come to an end!"

So, New Year's Day 2023 may not be as momentous an occasion as ringing in a new millennium twenty-three years ago, but we certainly need to remember the message and hope of our faith in God who has seen us through and will see us through all of our days. Once again this morning we come to the Lord's Table and remember that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (John 3:16)

On this day when it is tradition to make New Year's resolutions, it's important for us to be reminded how we are called to live as God's people, in momentous times and in the ordinary, day-to-day times that can threaten to overwhelm us and cause us to wonder, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!" Peter encouraged believers in his day with words that are relevant to you and me today: "What sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God? While you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation." (2 Peter 3:11-12, 14-15)

Do you know the old joke about the man who was praying to God and asked him, "Lord, is it true that to you a thousand years are like one day?" God replied, "Yes, my son, that is true." "So, then," the man went on, "does that mean that to you \$1,000,000 is like a penny?" Again, God said, "Yes, my son, that is true." The man said, "Well, God, you see, I'm a poor man and I was wondering if you could give me a penny." And God said, "Give me a day to think about it."

Despite Peter's apocalyptic language about the last days, fire, the day of judgment, the heavens being set ablaze and passing away, and the elements being dissolved with fire, the core of his message has been described as "God's mercy." Where is the promise of his coming? Well, in God's mercy, God has delayed (at least from our perspective) so that everyone who believes in his only Son may not perish but may have eternal life. We could hear that message in a very individualistic and greedy way — as long as I'm good and got what I want in terms of "going to heaven," that's all that matters. But that's not what our faith calls us to believe or how to live as God's people, whether it's in 80 A.D., on the threshold of the third millennium, or on New Year's Day 2023 when the world seems to be nothing but the same old, same old.

For centuries, individuals and groups have claimed to know God's timetable. Typically their thoughts have emphasized escaping the present by focusing on the future. But the gospel witness — in fact, the witness of the entire Bible — is about God's people living faithfully in our present circumstances because we trust that our future is in God's hands. In 1978, the Presbyterian Church approved a document called "The Doctrine of Last Things." Maybe you're wondering why I would mention "The Last

Things” on this first day of a NEW year. Well, the document was released during the heyday of books about the Rapture and the end times and the end of the world. I would like to share with you a few of the topic sentences and the conclusion of that report. They are certainly in agreement with Peter’s advice to the believers in 80 A.D. and they continue to provide us good guidance in 2023 A.D.

* We believe in focusing more on the fact of Christ’s return than in speculating on how it may occur.

* We believe in trusting that God has all things under control even when we cannot see the future clearly.

* We believe that to wait expectantly for Christ’s return is the command to every believer.

* We believe in practicing obedience to what is clear in the Scriptures rather than the interpretation of the obscure.

* We believe that we cannot sit passively by but must work for the kingdom of God until Christ returns.

* The hope for the world, today and in the future, is in Jesus Christ!

* We must be about doing the will of God on a daily basis, looking expectantly for Christ’s return, working for the kingdom of God and proclaiming the good news of the gospel.

* One day, in God’s own timing and own way, Christ will return and make all things new.

* Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Let us pray: Eternal God, you alone are constant in this changing world. Grant us true wisdom of heart and guide us in serving you all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.