

Getting It Right in the Coming Year

Galatians 4:4-7 & Luke 2:22-40

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616
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Galatians 4:4-7 (NIV)

⁴ But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons [and daughters]. ⁶ Because you are sons [and daughters], God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son [or a daughter]; and since you are a son, [or a daughter] God has made you also an heir.

Luke 2:22-40 (NIV)

²² When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for Him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took Him in his arms and praised God, saying: ²⁹ "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. ³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all people, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

³³ The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about Him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, His mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

³⁶ There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. ³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong; He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him.

Getting It Right in the Coming Year

It seems strange that New Year's Eve should fall on a Sunday. But that, of course, is what today is. Many of you are looking forward to New Year's Eve parties. I've always appreciated writer Bill Vaughan's words: "Youth is when you're allowed to stay up late on New Year's Eve. Middle age is when you're forced to."

I won't ask how late some of you will be up. Some of you will celebrate via your television. I also like what some comedian said about that. He said, "I love it when they drop the ball in Times Square. It's a nice reminder of what I did all year."

Well, I've dropped the ball a few times myself this past year. But tomorrow begins a new year, a time for a new beginning. What an appropriate time to be in worship when we can ask God to wipe the slate clean on our failures in the year that is passing and ask God's help for the year that is arriving.

Of course, you may be like Lucy in an old Peanuts comic strip. Lucy is walking along the road with Charlie Brown. Charlie Brown asks her: "Lucy, are you going to make any New Year's resolutions?"

Lucy hollers back at him, knocking him off his feet: "What? What for? What's wrong with me now? I like myself the way I am! Why should I change? What in the world is the matter with you, Charlie Brown? I'm all right the way I am! I don't have to improve. How could I improve? How, I ask you? How?"

Well, I've known a few Lucys in my time, but most of us are aware that we need to make some improvements in our lives. However, change is never easy, even when it comes to following through with a few resolutions. "I read somewhere that the top five resolutions are to get personal finances in order, lose weight, stop smoking, become more physically fit, and improve personal relationships. Some folks even decide to attend church more faithfully. I think they're going to start next week. Good. But the fact is that after only one week, almost a quarter of us have bailed out on whatever it was that we had resolved to do; after a month, almost half have given up; after two years, only about one in five still hang in."

Maybe if we gained some perspective on our lives, change would be easier. Maybe these words from St. Paul in his letter to the church at Galatia will help us get it right in the coming year: "But when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship [and daughtership]. Because you are His sons [or daughters], God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are His child, God has made you also an heir." Paul says so much in these few words that we need to take a few moments to consider them.

FIRST OF ALL, PAUL TALKS ABOUT THE FULLNESS OF TIME.

"But when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son . . ." The beginning of a New Year reminds us of the passage of time.

Author Calvin Miller tells about visiting with an old parishioner when Miller was a student pastor. The man was near death. “Do you think you will die, Ralph?” Miller asked this sick old patriarch, rather bluntly. “Yes,” replied the old man, “but more important than that, I think you will die too.”

Calvin Miller says this remark stunned him. He was twenty years old, and the old man was seventy-eight. “As a matter of fact,” the old man went on, “I’m pretty convinced that everybody who is living is going to die — some sooner, some later. And the only people who will really matter, when the dying is done with, are those who were good stewards of the time they have lived.” “Do you know what Psalm 90:12 says?” the old man asked his young pastor. Calvin Miller shook his head and answered, “No.”

At this, the old man recited Psalm 90:12, “Lord,” he said, “teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.” Then the old man added these well-remembered words, “There’s not a New Year’s Day that goes by that I don’t quote that to myself.”

“Teach us to number our days...” Someone has said that time waits for no one. It’s true. Time is passing for all of us. For some of us, it seems to be moving more quickly than for others. What are we doing with the time we have?

A story is told of an old gentleman who was overheard giving fatherly advice to a young lad. The man told the boy the story of “A Thousand Marbles.”

“Tom” he said, “I know life has kept you busy for a while now — but you may end up missing out on the things that really matter if you don’t get your priorities right. An idea struck me one morning,” he went on, “when I added up the number of Saturdays an average person who lives to 75 has, I discovered that it was 3,900 Saturdays. I did this by multiplying 75 by 52.”

Tom was engrossed with the old gentleman’s story. “See Tom, this thought hit me when I was 56 years old, meaning I had spent 2,912 Saturdays with 1,000 left if I am lucky enough to live to 75.”

“One day, I dressed up and headed over to a toy store where I bought 1000 marbles and placed them in a transparent container. Ever since then, I have been taking away one marble every Saturday. As the marbles diminished, I got to see how short life is, and was forced to get my priorities right. Watching these marbles diminish helped me see how brief life can be. I know these marbles will eventually all be gone. For me, every other Saturday that comes after that will be counted as a bonus.” The old man’s story made quite an impression on the boy.

I couldn’t help but think a little cynically that you are to do this exercise until you lose all your marbles — of course, I wouldn’t say that. But it is a healthy reminder that time is passing. A New Year is about to begin. Can there be any sadder person than one who comes to the end of life and says, “My life has been wasted. I could have done so much good in this world, but now it’s gone”?

These words from St. Paul remind us of the passage of time. “But when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son....”

But there is a second thing that Paul reminds us of in these words:

HE REMINDS US OF WHO WE ARE.

“But when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship [and daughtership]. . .”

WHAT GREATER THOUGHT CAN THERE BE TO TAKE INTO THE NEW YEAR? WE ARE THE ADOPTED SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF GOD.

I am convinced that the greatest problem in most people’s lives is that they don’t know, or at times don’t remember, who they really are.

Author Jeff Goins compares our situation to the action film character Jason Bourne. Do we have anyone here, besides myself, who is a Jason Bourne fan? For those who have never seen *The Bourne Identity* or any of the other five Bourne movies, Jason Bourne, played by actor Matt Damon, is a highly skilled former CIA assassin who was programmed to be a super spy. In the process of being programmed, however, he has all his past memories erased. He has all his life memories take from him. To paraphrase Jeff Goins, he is trained and equipped and destined for greatness, but without any idea any more of who he really is.

Here’s Bourne’s situation in his own words taken from the movie *The Bourne Identity*: “I can tell you the license plate numbers of all six cars outside. I can tell you that our waitress is left-handed and the guy sitting up at the counter weighs two hundred fifteen pounds and knows how to handle himself. I know the best place to look for a gun is the cab of the gray truck outside, and at this altitude, I can run flat out for a half mile before my hands start shaking. Now why would I know that?” Jason Bourne asks. “How can I know all that and not know who I am?”

That is the question for many people today. They have so much information at their fingertips, more than any generation that has ever lived. They have skills and talents and are able to accomplish so much. And yet they do not know who they are — and so they live flat, meaningless lives. We can see it in rising rates of suicides and increased deaths by narcotics abuse. How can a beautiful person — created in the image of God — come to such a state of despair? Simple — they simply do not know who they are.

“Dear friends,” writes John in his first epistle, “now we are the sons and daughters of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is (1 John 3:2).” Or as St. Paul writes in our lesson for today, “But when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under

the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship [and daughtership]....” That is Good News that everyone on earth can celebrate regardless of their life situation.

Author Selina Duncan tells about a Good Friday service that she attended with her grandson, Luka, who at the time was 10 years old. Luka has Down syndrome.

During this Good Friday service, each time after various people read scripture and gave a brief devotional, the congregation would sing, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”

After about the fourth time of singing this refrain, Luka (who loves music) substituted these words, “Jesus, remember Luka Hyde when you come into your Kingdom.”

Duncan says she stopped singing and tears welled up in her eyes. She writes, “To Luka it was no longer a song, but the whisper of God speaking to his soul. ‘Jesus, remember Luka Hyde when you come into your Kingdom.’ Wouldn’t it be wonderful if each of us would know the depth of Jesus’ love for us and that Jesus has already received us into His Kingdom?”

Do you know who you are? You are a child of God. You need to remember that.

Author Steve McVey says it in another way. He says that we are God’s work of art. He cites Ephesians 2:10, “We are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus.”

He notes that the word “workmanship” is the Greek word *poema*, from which we get the English word “poem.” He writes, “God has made you to be a heavenly piece of poetry on this earth!”

I like that. Do you know who you are as we prepare to begin this New Year? We are the children of God redeemed by God’s own Son.

WE NEED TO KNOW THAT AND OTHER PEOPLE OUGHT TO SEE THAT IN HOW WE LIVE OUR LIVES.

There is a wonderful story about the well-known playwright Arthur Miller. Miller was sitting alone in a bar when he was approached by an especially well-dressed man.

“Aren’t you Arthur Miller?” the well-dressed man asked. “Why, yes, I am,” Miller responded. “Don’t you remember me?” asked the man. Hesitantly, Miller replied, “Well, your face seems familiar.” The man declared, “Why, Art, I’m your old buddy Sam! We went to high school together! We went out on double-dates!”

Miller still couldn’t place him. Sam continued, “I guess you can see I’ve done alright — department stores. What do you do, Art?”

The author replied, “Well, I write.” “Whaddya write?” the man asked. “Plays, mostly,” came the reply. “Would I know any?” the man pressed. Miller responded, “Well, perhaps you’ve heard of Death of a Salesman?”

Sam’s mouth fell open. His face drained of color. He stood speechless for a moment. And then he cried out, “Why, you’re ARTHUR MILLER!”

His old friend Sam didn’t really know who Arthur Miller was until he knew what Miller had done with his life. And so it is with us.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful to run in to an old friend who was familiar with our life’s work and have them say to us, “Why you’re a SON OR DAUGHTER OF GOD! I can see it in your eyes. I can see it in the way you live. I can see it in your love for others. I can see it when others try to intimidate you and you return their hostility with love. I can see it in your good works for our community. I can see it in the way you treat your family. I know who you are — you are a child of God.”

It’s good as we say good-bye to 2017 and welcome in the year of our Lord 2018, that we are reminded how quickly time passes and how important it is that we make good use of our days. And it is also good to be reminded of who we are, children of God. Hopefully people will know that by the way we live.

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