

Embrace All Hope

Revelation 3:14-22

Text:

*Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking;
if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.*

Revelation 3:20

Introduction

Only three days into the month of January, we are virtually standing at the threshold of the New Year.

The image that is set before us in our scripture passage this morning is the image I'd like us to see, to hear, and to claim as we stand on this threshold together. It's the image of the Risen Christ addressing—through the words of the Spirit—the Church in Laodicea. He is standing at the door of opportunity, inviting the church to hear his voice and to open the door to him. If they do, he will come in to them and will eat with them, and they with him.

It's the perfect image for us who stand on the threshold of 2010 with hopes and dreams for a whirling world we love so much.

As we all know, the month of January is named after the Roman god Janus, who possessed two faces: one looking forward to the year ahead and one looking backward to the year gone by.

Paralyzed by the Past

The most immediate liability we encounter on the threshold of the New Year is the possibility of being paralyzed by the past.

Such a paralysis happened to the Church in Laodicea, who said, "I am rich, I have prospered, I need nothing." Their affluence and self-satisfaction led them to a smug indifference, which sapped their passion for life and dissipated their compassion for others.

The Spirit observes that they are neither cold with evil works nor hot with good works but rather lukewarm with smug indifference.

They were lukewarm, and their sin was tepidity . . . being tepid as lukewarm water. They were paralyzed by their past successes, which made their bed for isolation and lethargy.

Our absorption with the past has less to do with affluence and self-satisfaction and perhaps more to do with our regrets.

We all possess an intimate knowledge of Charles Dickens' classic *A Christmas Carol*, featuring the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge. Actually Dickens wrote five Christmas stories, each possessing its own charm in a particular way, including *The Haunted Man*. Standing on the threshold of the New Year, the main character looks back on all his past sorrows and pleads with the spirit in his room to take away his memory of the past. *Memory is our curse*, he laments. *We bear with us a*

sorrow and a wrong, trouble and folly from our past. The spirit complies with the haunted man's request, but the man soon discovers that he has no recollection of his previous joys and prior accomplishments as well. This brings added torment to him, to the point that he pleads again with the spirit to restore his memory of all things past. *The past is never dead,* wrote Faulkner. *It's not even past.* It is an active ingredient of our present.

If we could forget the sorrow, wrong, and trouble we have known, we would. If we could wipe our memories clean of the sorrows and sufferings we have experienced, we would. In the middle of the night, when *wicked dreams abuse our curtain'd sleep*ⁱ and memory presses its imperious self upon our restless consciousness, when we involuntarily rehearse the sins of our past, the catastrophic choices, the impetuous blunders, the cruel comments, the slippery schemes, the clandestine betrayals, the purloining power plays, would that we could forget those previous circling years that re-awaken prior sorrow and preceding trouble!

An Essential Resolution

An initial and essential resolution for us on this threshold of the New Year is to put the past in perspective.

Dag Hammarskjöld wrote an entry in his journal in 1951:

*We cannot afford to forget any experience,
not even the most painful.*

Why is this? The answer lies squarely in understanding the integrated Christian life: that is, the insightful Christian perceives the whole or entirety of his/her life as an eternal *Yes* to God in Christ, that is, that the moment we answer unequivocally *Yes* to Christ, from that moment, we are certain that existence is meaningful, that is, **all** of existence is meaningful, in total, in its entirety: past, present and future.ⁱⁱ

There can be no artificial separation between past and present,, between present and future. Every personal experience—even the folly of the past, especially the sufferings, the wrongs, the troubles, the torments of the past—every personal experience makes up the fabric of the large tapestry of our lives. Our sins, our sorrow, our sufferings, our foolishness lend a particular hue to the tapestry. Were we actually able to wipe out the unpleasantness of our past, we would distort our very own distinctiveness.

As we recall Dante's *Inferno*, we remember that he begins his journey through hell with his guide Virgil. His treatise starts with this declaration: *In the middle of the journey of life I came to myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost* He soon stands before the Gates of Hell, which display an unnerving inscription:

*Through me is the way into the doleful city; through me the way into eternal pain; through me the way among the people lost.....
Abandon all hope, ye that enter.*

The unbearable pain of Dante's *Inferno* is that in it no one possesses a vision of hope for the future.

Passion for the Promise

The Christian message is precisely opposite to the inscription over the Gate of Hell: embrace all hope, ye that enter into the New Year and the future God spreads out before us. Cultivate a passion for the Promise: *If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you and you with me.*

Edwin van Driel, Associate Professor of Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and author of the book titled *Incarnation Anyway*, contended in *Adult Education* on December 20 that it is Divine Friendship that God is seeking with us. Christ came not just to forgive our sins but to be in fellowship with us, asserted Dr. Van Driel.

I will come in to you and eat with you. Could we cultivate a passion for this promise? What could possibly provide a greater hope for us than the Christ who wishes to dwell with us, who forgives our past, who accepts us as we are, and calls us to his table to eat with him? This promise is the source of the vibrant, eternal hope we possess as Christians.

Henri Nouwen draws an essential distinction between optimism and hope:

Optimism and hope are radically different attitudes. Optimism is the expectation that things—the weather, human relationships, the economy, the political situation, and so on—will get better. Hope is the trust that God will fulfill God's promises to us in a way that leads us to true freedom. The optimist speaks about concrete changes in the future. The person of hope lives in the moment with the knowledge and trust that all of life is in good hands. All the great spiritual leaders in history were people of hope.

The Dying Boy

The school system in a large city had a program to help children keep up with their school work during stays in the city's hospitals. One day a teacher who was assigned to the program received a routine call asking her to visit a particular child. She took the child's name and room number and talked briefly with the child's regular class teacher. "We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now," the regular teacher said, "and I'd be grateful if you could help him understand them so he doesn't fall too far behind."

The hospital program teacher went to see the boy that afternoon. No one had mentioned to her that the boy had been badly burned and was in great pain. Upset at the sight of the boy, she stammered as she told him, "I've been sent by your school to help you with nouns and adverbs." When she left she felt she hadn't accomplished much. But the next day, a nurse asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" The teacher felt she must have done something wrong and began to apologize. "No, no," said the nurse. "You don't know what I mean. We've been worried about that little boy, but ever since yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."

Two weeks later the boy explained that he had completely given up hope until the teacher arrived. Everything changed when he came to a simple realization. He expressed it this way: “They wouldn’t send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?”

Without hope, life swiftly and despondently ebbs out its little day. But with hope all things seem possible.

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

Shall we weave together our separate destinies into a vivid tapestry of mutual ministry and ceaseless service? Shall we together serve Jesus Christ at this time and in this place. Whatever God allows, I am convinced that a boundless vision grows upon us, an untamed passion to love and serve resides within us, an insatiable *wanderlust* to traverse the vast and endless vistas of mystery drives us on...

*For we hear beyond the range of sound,
we see beyond the range of sight
New earths and skies and seas around.....
and in this time our hope takes its flight.ⁱⁱⁱ*

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3 January 2010**

ⁱ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

ⁱⁱ This sentiment is expressed by Dag Hammarskjöld in his *Markings*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted from Henry David Thoreau