

“Time for Something New”

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

January 1, 2023

Lamentations 3: 17a-26 and Revelation 21:1-6a

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Since I have been alive this is the sixth time that New Year’s Day has been on a Sunday. If you made it to see the **shining*** ball drop, sang auld lang syne at midnight, watched the end of the Ohio State game, or were asleep for a few hours before that, our 11:00 a.m. worship time means we can get enough sleep and make it **home** for 1:00 p.m. kick-offs.

By New Years day commercial *Christmas* is past, although we are still in the season of Christmas, which lasts for 12 days until the Epiphany. So we are on to the *New Year’s* sales, many based on assumed resolutions. Discount gym memberships, Dry January apps, special sales on **heart** healthy meal prep packages. And my inbox this week was flooded with year-end reviews – best 10 books of 2022, lists of famous people who died last year, biggest news stories, my favorite was an email about 183 ways the world improved in 2022.

<https://reasonstobecheerful.world/the-year-in-cheer-2022/>

You may have your own practices of year-end-review, looking backward and reflecting, taking stock on the major events of 2022 for you and the world, weighing the highs and the lows of it.

You may be a resolution person, one study said 41% of adults make them, the rhythm of our common calendar giving a jump start for something new, or life giving, or healthy in body, mind or spirit.

If you are in the 41% our Christian faith guides our approach to the new, since the foundation of possibility for newness is **hope**. As the Psalmist says, our hope comes from the **Lord**, and as Paul writes to the Romans, we follow a God of hope through whom we ourselves can abound in hope.

At some point in my decade as an elementary school teacher, a veteran teacher once gave me what she called a “magic line” and I repeat it to myself, probably every day I teach, more on my most difficult or least patient days, and here is that magic line, “this child is doing their best with what they have.” This child, with his or her unique mix of personality, brain chemistry, sleep that day, sense of belonging, challenges at home, emotional regulation, mental wellbeing, school experiences, understanding of task, how they feel about how they are doing socially or academically, sibling and family dynamics, outside stressors from too much of something or too little of something else, or simply how hungry they are, this child is doing his or her best with what they’ve got available to them at that moment.

If I as their teacher would like to see something that I would call “better” than the best I am seeing from a child - in behavior, kindness, classroom output - then we need to work on some category of what they have. It is an intentional perspective, grounded in a belief that no eight-year-old wakes up and thinks, “today I am going to wreak havoc on my classroom and get in so much trouble.” Those of us who have parented kids who have had that day of havoc and trouble can tell you that no one woke up wanting that.

It might be easier to abound in hope for a child who is all possibility and newness, and I **fear** I am less consistently good at holding on to this perspective for my own teenagers, but I think this is exactly how God looks at each of us beloved children of any age. That we are doing pretty good, maybe even the best, with what we have, but there is something in that basket of parts that makes up each of us that God wants to change, or build up, or remove, so that we have more that God can use, so that we might be better disciples and servants of our Lord. So even now God is making that happen, moving to break the chains that bind us, to disrupt the life-sucking patterns we feel stuck in – and to guide us onto wider paths and perspectives about ourselves....and especially in how we see others.

And God is doing that like a teacher in a classroom: by telling a better story about us, about who we were and who we are, what we’ve done and where we are going, than we have been telling about ourselves. The verses from Lamentations Chapter 3 do this storytelling by looking backward... to find the hope to look forward... in a present time that feels hopeless.

My family went to see Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* this week, with the famous line by Prospero, “what’s past is prologue” that is also engraved on our National Archives building. In Lamentations, Israel is looking to the past for a hopeful story to build a new future upon, the prologue for a better time to come. Lamentations is a poetic response to a national tragedy, much like Bruce Springsteen writing *The Rising* after the deaths on September 11th.

For the context of Lamentations, Babylon has defeated Judah after a long siege of Jerusalem, whereby the leaders and elite were deported, the temple burned, city destroyed, and the rest left in illness and famine. Much of Lamentations describes this devastation with the rawness of poetry about suffering and what has been **lost**, even up through verse 20 of Chapter 3. When it changes in verse 21 to tell a story of hope it is because of remembering, they switch intention and call to mind the attributes of their experience with God as the basis for hope, that God is steadfast, merciful and faithful, a recalling to the mind of Exodus 34:6, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and full of **grace**, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” Walter Bruggemann (*Theology of the Old Testament, Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy, pages 221-224*) writes that remembering is the move from hopeless to hope, not as a **blind** hope, but a characteristic of the Israelites who return again and again to what he calls “resilient rhetoric.” Words they have repeated for a **thousand** years. Israel could not have responded in hope-filled faith in the midst of such a crisis without this phrase deep within their DNA: steadfast, merciful, faithful.

Same with the community intended for the words of Revelation Chapter 21. John, the only disciple said to have not died a death of martyrdom, was exiled on the island of Patmos when he received a revelation, an apocalypse or unveiling. It is an unveiling of a vision that is beyond our world and time, and it is also an unveiling of words of God's comfort to people who were being terribly persecuted by the Roman Emperors Nero and Caligula. The number 666 that has entered our culture as a sign of evil, may simply be a numerical representation of the Hebrew name for Nero, something that was common at the time of the writing of Revelation - it would have served as something of a code to the receivers of the letter. To Christians whose lives were under constant threat, imagine being the only disciple not to have been killed for your faith, maybe **relieved** but always aware of danger, this story of hope, through code and imagination, looks forward, death no more, tears wiped away, beyond the grasp of mourning and crying and pain, not in some elevated heaven in the sky but God coming down, to dwell with them and redeem them from their suffering, but it would be **found** exactly where they are, only transformed with newness and the presence of God.

A story just as grounded in their experience of God as the Israelite's story, because the promise of the incarnation of Jesus is a story whose fulfillment is still to come. The **promised** fulfillment is the hope. The beginning of changing, or building up or removing, so that what you have available is more, *the beginning* of it is the hope-filled vision that it is possible to do so. Because you **believed**: from faith and scripture, from your past experience of God, that you are not stuck forever and things won't always be this way. Because, from Lamentations, you or you and your faith community has experienced enough of God's steadfast mercy and faithfulness to tell yourself a story of **amazing** possibility, or because, from Revelation, you or you and your faith community holds so strongly to the promise of the coming goodness of God, the new Jerusalem, to imagine a story of it happening.

Whether or not you make resolutions, about anything, or about your spiritual life, a Christian practice, the possibility for newness is grounded in our faith, in scripture and theology, first in the covenant relationship God had with the Israelites, where they experienced God as the one who broke their chains and set them free, that first gave them a resilient rhetoric to recall, and then in the incarnation, the birth of Jesus who came to dwell with us, to set up camp as a human, that we might be **saved**, and in doing so to disrupt every set pattern and unstick every narrow rut the things that tell people, that tell us, that the hard things will always be as they are.

Jesus whole approach was as one who understood that people were doing their best with what they had, so he came to give them more. More forgiveness, justice, kindness, love, so much love, understanding, healing and peace, and a better story, the best story we will ever know: Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see. Alleluia, Amen.

*the 16 words in **bold** were on the "Amazing Grace" bingo board