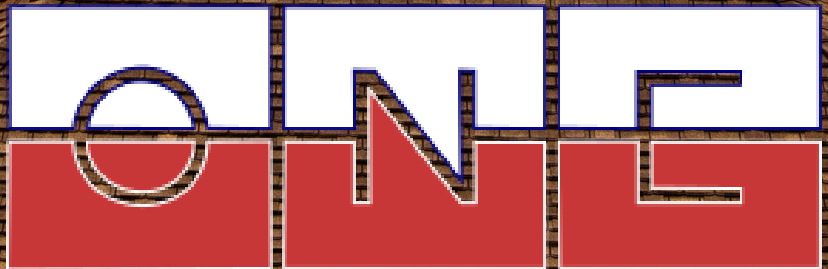


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Trusting God's Plan for 2021

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January 2021. A new beginning. People tend to see January 1 as a new beginning every year. Resolutions are made, goals set, planners opened, and events and trips carefully scheduled. The excitement of a new year sets in. In the midst of the current pandemic, the build-up to the new year seems more prevalent.

The memes on social media are overwhelming about putting 2020 behind us and how great 2021 is going to be. I'm sure I'm not alone when I sincerely hope this is the truth. The "bad" of 2020 definitely overshadows the many wonderful things that resulted from it.

2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"

I've spent a lot of time in the last few weeks reflecting

back to this time just one short year ago. My family and I took a week-long trip with another family we don't reside with - in the same vehicle - four states away. We knew of a virus brewing in China, but barely gave it a second thought. We shared a great week together and I'm so grateful for the memories created on that trip.

We were together over the New Year's holiday. We celebrated the end of 2019 and vowed to make 2020 "OUR year". My friends and my family quickly filled our 2020 calendars with athletic events, musical events, concerts, conferences, presentations, and vacations. How exciting and memorable 2020 was going to be.

SCREECH! You know exactly when and where you were, I guarantee. Much like many personal and national tragedies, we can say exactly when our lives have been stopped mid-course. One week before spring break was to begin and our first big

trip of 2020, we entered the pandemic time and nothing has been quite the same.

The stores ran out of toilet paper and many other essential supplies - people became supply hoarders. We were told to isolate and hunker down in our homes. Businesses were ordered to close. Workers were determined to be either essential or non-essential. We were told to wear masks to protect one another. Students had to do their schoolwork from home. Concerts were cancelled. Sporting events were cancelled. Much of our "normal" was cancelled. For the faith community, our buildings were closed and we moved our services online - and some even stopped having services. Chaos, turmoil, and uncertainty prevailed. Prayer became more prevalent, also.

Many turned to prayer and their faith as the one thing that seemed to be solid and constant. God never fails us.

Trusting God's Plan for 2021 (Continued)

He never leaves us. We are told to trust his plans. We definitely needed that message throughout 2020.

Isaiah 40:31 says, "but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not

grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

As we look toward 2021, we have many things (once again) to anticipate. The future is uncertain, yes - it always is. We have a vaccine making its way. We have things being scheduled. But

we are still a bit uncertain when and where life is taking us. When we focus on God and trust his plans, we know that there is always that opportunity for a new beginning. May 2021 be yet another chance to grow in whatever way we can.

New Beginnings

Pastor Micah Sanderson

Cross Point of Hays

This last week, my English teacher from Brewster High School, Mrs. Depe, had a simple yet very profound Facebook status. Here is what it says: "I keep seeing how everyone wants this year to be over, wanting 2021 to be here. I hope y'all know it won't be all good instantly. We'll have to work at it!" I completely agree! I did ask her permission to quote her status, but honestly I hope she doesn't read this article because I'm sure she'll get out her red pen, and start making corrections everywhere! Ain't that right Mrs. Depe?

A new beginning is a fresh start. The bringing of something into existence that has never existed before. It's a place or time

where something new begins.

I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that most of you, like those who commented on Mrs. Depe's status, are glad that 2020 is coming to end! It's probably safe to assume that most of us are tired, confused, and somewhat perplexed by the events that have taken place in 2020. Toilet paper anyone?

Thanks goodness, 2021 is soon to arrive! However - just because there is a new calendar year quickly approaching for us, it does not mean our lives will suddenly get better and everything will be new at midnight on December 31. As Mrs. Depe said, "We'll have to work at it!"

The New Year is a great time to reflect, make changes, and start something new. Since God specializes in

new beginnings, I thought we could learn about working together towards New Beginnings in 2021 from a passage in Isaiah. A simple, familiar, and often easier said than done passage - but one that is important if you want to start now!

Isaiah 43: 18-19 says: "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."

The first important step to a new beginning is to recognize that it is the end of a prior new beginning. We acknowledge the past, learn from it - both the good and bad. But we have to move on! We are to "forget the former things" and not dwell on our past! We may not be able to "forget" the past -

New Beginnings (Continued)

but we must let go of it and not allow it to hold us back for the future. I love how the Message translation of this scripture states it: "Forget about what's happened; don't keep going over old history."

Secondly, we must look for what God is doing and join Him in that! The word "perceive" means to: "become aware or conscious of something; come to realize or understand." The Message translation puts it this way: "Be alert. Be present." How exciting for us to be able to join Him in what He's doing! This may be something on a

global scale. Maybe it's something in your family. Maybe it's with a co-worker or a classmate. Maybe it's even in your own personal life. Wherever He's working and whatever He's doing - we need to be aware of that, be present in that situation, and join Him in that.

Lastly, we have to trust God that He will make a way! In that situation that seems hopeless, and there is no solution you can see. In your marriage, where it seems that there is no peace or love. Or maybe it's the start of a new career, a move to a new city or a new relationship. Whatever it may be, He WILL

make a way. He WILL lead you through the "wilderness" and through the "wasteland" on to what He has for you in a new beginning!

I close with another encouraging word from the Bible. Lamentations 3:22-23 says: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." God is faithful. He has your best interest at heart. His love for you will never cease. Let's forget the difficulty of 2020 and let's work together in making a new beginning for 2021 that He has already begun!

Same Pandemic—New Hope

Anna Towns

Trinity Lutheran Church

I recently saw this posted on Facebook, "The new thing that God seeks often occurs in times of disruption, when the familiar world has collapsed and the future is in doubt, when the days grow shorter, and we wonder if darkness will swallow the light... God's new thing is a vision of 'something more,' a hovering possibility that challenges the world as it is."

The quote is attributed to The Work of Christmas: The 12 Days of Christmas with Howard Thurman by Bruce Epperly. Those twelve days of Christmas end on Epiphany, the arrival of the Magi. This season of Epiphany is all about light. We have come through the darkness of winter, we've passed the darkest day of the year, December 21, and we get a bit more of that bright light each day.

In 2021, this hopeful season is coming at a time when "the familiar world has collapsed." When we were closing schools for an extra bit of Spring Break last March, most of us never dreamed we'd still be using Zoom for Worship, considering Communion a risk, and living with all the other "new normal" activities almost a year later.

Our world has been ravaged by COVID-19. Many of us did not celebrate the holidays in our traditional

Same Pandemic—New Hope (Continued)

ways; we missed first steps, final hugs, and more—and we are stepping into this new year without 1.67 million (as of this writing) of our friends, neighbors, and loved ones the world over. Our front-line workers are exhausted at new levels; all that family time we used to crave is wearing thin after months of shelter-in-place orders, quarantines, homeschooling, etc., and the loneliness of our most vulnerable neighbors is at a desperate level. To put it plainly, we are weary.

Matthew 11:28-30 says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” One way God has taught us to

make our burdens light is to help each other.

One of my favorite pre-COVID activities was singing in a choir. The Smoky Hill Chorale is not meeting right now, and we aren’t doing any corporate singing at Trinity yet; however, my experience singing helps me lean into an analogy about helping our neighbors. When singing in a choir, sometimes you have to stop to take a breath, but those around you are there to carry the tune until you can rejoin. If you are feeling weary, take a break, and let God give you rest. If you are renewed and restored, help carry the tune so your neighbor can rest. That might look like picking up groceries for a friend who’s quarantined, posting a positive message in your window, leaving a special note or treat for your mail

carrier, donating food or money to those who are struggling right now, sending cards or calling loved ones, or making masks for your local hospital or shelter.

In this time of COVID, when we cannot always lift each other’s burdens in the same ways we used to, there is still help to be given, spirits to be lifted, and renewal to be found. This pandemic is awful. BUT, God is doing amazing things—even in the midst of this pandemic. There are vaccines coming, and while all aspects of our “new normal” will not be going away, we can embrace these necessary changes, find joy in small moments, rest when we need it, and do our part to make this Epiphany and all of 2021 a hopeful, joy-filled, new beginning.

Hope and Joy for the Present and Future

***Brandon Nimz
Unite Ministries***

For many believers and for me, the last year has been a time to reflect, recenter our lives, and be forged by the trying times around us. Romans 5:3-5 says, “We can

rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation.”

Likewise, James 1:2-4 says “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature

Being Transformed by Christ (Continued)

and complete, not lacking anything."

Though this process is real for those in whom the Holy Spirit is working, it often takes us relying on the Holy Spirit to get through the process and for us to see the process in this light. Without the Holy Spirit's help, spiritual growth processes often just look like the problems and trials that the Bible verses mention. I find the same is true for me with physical exercise. Even knowing the goal and the reasons, day one of any fairly serious workout routine after a time of not working out is very uncomfortable. In reality though the process creates better overall physical health, it often even involves short-term damage in terms of micro-tears in my muscles and exhausting body resources. Eventually, the fruit of this physical training becomes visible as I end up healthier and with better physical capabilities than I had before. I feel that will be

the case for many of us spiritually due to last year's growth phase.

For those of us who have experienced such growth, as things change and the new year begins to flow differently than the previous, it is a time to double-down and listen to the Holy Spirit with great anticipation and excitement. My human nature will tempt me on both sides of the spectrum—both to excessive rest and recreation that will be newly available and to getting overly committed with work that I am again able to engage in. Both of those things in moderation are fine, but in excess will turn into the weeds that choke out the spiritual harvest that Jesus mentions in Matthew 13:22.

Instead of immediately becoming distracted by the worries and cares of this world, I want to listen to see how the Holy Spirit wants to continue this growth and to use some of this newfound

spiritual strength to further the Kingdom. The exciting thing is that only He knows how this will play out for each of us specifically.

I am confident we will have opportunities to use our talents and to invest them for the good of all (Matthew 25:14-29). Regardless of what form this takes for each of us individually, we as believers are blessed to be able to walk forward in our hope and joy, and I sincerely pray that this joy radiates out to touch the world around us. In truth, the biggest time for this hope and joy to stand out has been during this time of growth and struggle, as even very worldly individuals will feel hope from things returning to a more normal pattern. It is my personal hope that even then we can come alongside the hope and joy that even nonbelievers will likely feel to point others back to the true source of hope and joy—Christ himself.

THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY TO BE REVIVED AND HEALED FROM OUR BACKSLIDINGS SO THAT WE MAY BECOME FRUITFUL EVEN IN OLD AGE. WE MUST TAKE A STEADY LOOK AT THE GLORY OF CHRIST IN HIS SPECIAL CHARACTER, IN HIS GRACE AND WORK, AS SHOWN TO US IN THE SCRIPTURE. - JOHN OWEN