

THE FUTURE KEEPS TURNING INTO THE PRESENT

Sermon, January 3, 2021

Text: Ephesians 1:3-14

The future keep turning into the present; it's here before you know it! Here we are, the first Sunday of 2021. It was twenty-one years ago we were all worried about Y2K and the beginning of a new millennium! For some of us, doesn't it seem like just yesterday? On the other hand, in some respects it seems like a lifetime ago ... and for some here, it was *more* than a lifetime ago! 2015 was six years ago ... 2015 was the year Marty McFly and Professor Emmett Brown traveled TO in **Back to the Future II** (*a movie that came out in 1989*). Now 2015 is Back to the Past! And here we are eight years and three weeks after the Mayan calendar told us the world would be no more, for the Mayan calendar predicted the world would end December 21, 2012. The Mayans are gone, but we're still here! On the New Year's Eve when we welcomed 1998, the last hours of 1997 ... again, not all that long ago ... my daughter Hannah took her first steps. And it was January 19, 1997 that I conducted my first baptism here, a baby organist ... right here in front of this chancel ... and I conducted his wedding January 11, 2020 in front of this same chancel! (*Their first anniversary is next Monday.*) The older we get, the faster time seems to fly ... as my dad used to joke, everything seems to pick up speed when you are heading downhill. Just so you know, there are now just 352 days until next Christmas ... that may seem like an eternity when you are six, but when you are sixty-plus ... Christmas will be here before you know it!

The future does keep turning into the present. There are people who were with us last year at this time who are not with us today. In 2020, a dozen joined the ranks of the church triumphant ... Fran Bonn, Nancy Dickerman, Walter Budlong, Janet Pisano, Nancy Allen, Marge Platt, Betty Herman, Myrle Dean, Betty Tanner, Mack Graham, Glen Corsetti ... and just this past week, Elsa Ashton. But it's a blessing to know there are also people here or who are joining us online who weren't a part of our congregation this time last year ... you are now very much a part of this church's present and future. For some of us, the future can't get here quickly enough; for others, the future is much too quickly becoming the present. Each time we face a new year we have hope that things will be different, that things will be better; we approach the new year with the hope of new possibilities, positive change, new growth.

I like the story of two men having a conversation about one of their colleagues. One said, "*Did you know he has thirty years of experience in his field?*" The other responded a bit sardonically, "*Actually, he hasn't had thirty years of experience. He has had one year of experience thirty times.*" For him, the future kept turning into the *same* present over and over again. This is not a good thing! If the future just keeps turning into more of the same, that means for the future to be different, for things to change, for the future to get better, then steps have to be taken in the present, changes need to be made now, and resolutions need to be made and kept! Don't let resolutions simply "*go in one year and out the other;*" KEEP them, change the future by improving your present.

Resolutions help us to set priorities. Resolutions are a good thing, especially if there are changes we need to make in our lives. I've always liked the story about the poor guy who telephoned his girlfriend and got the following recording: "*I am not available right now, but thank you for calling. I am making some changes in my life. Please leave a message after the beep. If I do not return your call, you are one of the changes.*" (*She didn't call back.*)

I believe another reason we make resolutions is that we are made in the image of a *resolute* God who also makes (and keeps!) resolutions. From Genesis to Revelation, the entire Bible is a witness to God's overall *resolution*, God's determination, to do us all *good*. As our future keeps turning into our present, He wants us to experience the fullness of life He has to offer. From cover to cover the Bible is about God's *resolution* to redeem us AND to turn us into a people who will go out and become His co-workers, agents of His redeeming, reconciling, restoring love in this world. As our New Testament reading asserts, God's resolution toward humanity took place long before creation came to be. Even before the beginning of time, God resolved two things:

One, He resolved to fashion creation in a marvelous and complex way, by the Word of His mouth. We don't even get past the first three verses of the Bible before God speaks the first words, constructive, creative words of power, bringing light into the darkness. I've made this point before from this pulpit, but it bears repeating: God didn't use His words to curse the darkness that was there! God spoke into that darkness and turmoil and used His words in a constructive, creative, redemptive, and helpful way. This is a sermon in itself, but a good resolution for us would be to emulate our Creator by determining to use all our words in the same way: Constructively, creatively, redemptively, helpfully. On a somewhat related note, I came across a little-known quote of Martin Luther King which I thought about saving for the Sunday prior to the holiday we commemorate his birth, but to go ahead and cite it now: "In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." Let's

determine to use our words constructively, creatively, redemptively, helpfully ... and especially when they need to be spoken in defense of the honorable and good.

God's second resolution is that God resolved to enter into creation and become human for a time when the time was right; or, as Paul expresses it, *"in the fullness of time."* Even before the creation of the world, God resolved to do this. The Artist became a living part of His creation, the Word became flesh; God became a human being, a Person through Whom all creation would find resolution, redemption. He became involved with the object of His devotion and creation ... another divine resolution, by the way, it would be good for us to emulate, to become *involved* with the people we profess to be the objects of our devotion. Our reading from Ephesians tells us God's *ultimate* resolution is for all things ... not just some things, not just a select few ... for *all* things in heaven and on earth to one day *"... come together under one head, even Christ."* God's resolve is to finally gather up all things, all people, all everything ... in Christ. This has been God's resolution from the very beginning, even from *before* the very beginning. God ordered this universe in such a way that all things will return to Him and find their resolution, their completion, in and through Jesus Christ. That's the glorious future God has resolved that will one day become the present. *Our* part is to resolve to live right now *"... for the praise of God's glory (v. 12)"* and be a vital part of bringing that glorious future into more of the present! How do we do that? Mainly by living each moment as if we take God seriously, allowing our lives to display the glory of God wherever we live, work or play. Again, if the future just keeps turning into more of the present, that means for the future to be different, for things to change, for the future to get better, then steps have to be taken in the present.

I close by reviewing a list of resolutions one pastor prepared for his congregation; I've shared these a few times over the years, but they bear repeating ... "7-UPS for the New Year." 7-UPS I believe we can all determine to resolutely practice in the present to ensure a better future.

- 1) The first "up" is WAKE UP. Wake up and begin each day with the attitude you are receiving that day as a gift; after all, that's one reason we call it the *present!* It really is a gift to be alive, a gift that needs to be received and used well. The day really is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Some of you may know that talk radio personality Rush Limbaugh received the grim diagnosis of a stage four lung cancer in January 2020, and has been undergoing medical treatments all year. He did not expect to still be alive and hosting his program to this day, but he continues to be an inspiration to many as he follows this principle. He's attested to this resolve countless times on air throughout the year, saying, *"Today, I woke up, and I thanked God that I did."*
- 2) The second "up" is DRESS UP. It's been said the most important article of "clothing" we need to put on each day is a smile. Smile, if for no other reason than it improves your looks and your outlook. You may be surprised how often the attitude follows the facial framework, how the present smile makes for future happiness, AND how that smile can affect the temperament of all you encounter. That is made a little more difficult now by the requirement to wear face coverings nearly everywhere we go, but as my daughter learned in nursing school, you can make an effort to "Smile with your eyes" while wearing a facemask!
- 3) The third "up" is SHUT UP. *(And yes, the pastor said "Shut up!" from the pulpit!)* Watch your tongue. Don't gossip. Don't say destructive, corrosive, degrading and/or discouraging things. Learn to talk less and listen more!
- 4) The fourth "up" sounds somewhat contradictory to the last one, but it is SPEAK UP. Say nice things, good things. Determine to use your words for constructive, creative, encouraging and redemptive purposes. Speak up and take a stand for what you believe. Speak against evil. Speak for the good. Defend your convictions ... *and* your friends. Again, the words of Martin Luther King: *"In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."* Speak up!
- 5) The fifth "up" is LOOK UP. Set your heart and mind on things above, on higher things. Look up and determine to always keep your eyes and heart out of the gutters and debased cellars of life. Determine each and every day to lift your eyes to the Lord.
- 6) The sixth "up" is related to the fifth, and it is to REACH UP. Spend time in deliberative and purposeful prayer reaching up to our Lord for help, for consolation, for strength, for aid and guidance.
- 7) And finally, LIFT UP ... determine to help lift up those around you by serving, supporting, sharing. Be an elevating, lifting presence to all who come your way. Do all you can to lift others up; don't bring them down.

Wake up, dress up, shut up, speak up, look up, reach up and lift up. All ways of living out what should be our one all-encompassing resolution ... to live **FOR THE PRAISE OF GOD'S GLORY** in 2021. As we do so, we thereby improve our present and ensure a better future ... as that future keeps turning into our present!