

New Year's Day: Living by the Spirit in 2006

Galatians 5:13-25

No Sunday School Classes. Childcare available.

Dr. Harry Winsheimer

Sunday, January 1, 2006

one worship service - 11:00 a.m.

Happy New Year! Are you awake?

New Year's Day provides a great opportunity to look back on last year and strategize for the new year. The news media is filled with assessments of what happened in 2005 and projections of what will happen in 2006. I pick up the same theme: looking back and looking ahead.

THE PAST: Blessings

We bring many blessings from our past into 2006! Some of them bring tremendous joy and gratification. One that I shared with the women of the Association when I taught their Christmas lesson, I share with you. My father always worked on Christmas morning from about 5:30 till 8:00. When he came home, I had been chafing to open the presents. Standing at the window watching for him, I would demand that mother answer repeatedly, "How soon will Dad get here?" And then, when he finally got home, we would gather around the tree. I could see the presents. We were poor so there weren't many, which made each very important. Furthering my anticipation and frustration, Dad would get Mother's thick study Bible, read Luke 2:1-20, and offer a prayer. Finally, we would get to the presents. That was the theology and lifestyle of my Christian parents. God's tithing was given first and we lived on the remainder. God's time was given and we did our things in the remainder. On Christmas morning, acknowledgment of God's gift came first, then we opened our presents. Now I am the senior member of the clan. This past Monday, the clan of over twenty gathered in my brother and sister-in-law's home in Pennsylvania. My sister-in-law handed me the Bible and I read the Nativity Story and offered prayer. Then, we exchanged gifts. How deeply meaningful! How I treasure that memory that I bring from the past into 2006!

Luke reports that after eight days had passed, Mary and Joseph took baby Jesus for circumcision and to present him to the Lord at the temple in Jerusalem. About this time after Christmas, Jesus' birth. This was customary and according to Old Testament law. There old man Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying, "At last, Lord, you can bring me to death in peace, as you promised! For with my own eyes I have seen your salvation...." Also present was Anna. She was a very old woman, a widow of eighty-four. She spent her time in the Temple, worshipping God with fasting and prayers. She came up at that very moment, praised God and spoke about Jesus to all. They had waited and waited for God to act. When they saw baby Jesus, they knew that God was climaxing history. The critical time for salvation had come. Good News was being delivered! And, they were thrilled. And they praised God!

Over what are you thrilled, for what are you thankful?

I am going to pause for a moment. I want you to think of one blessing that you bring from the past into 2006---just one blessing, one memory, one news flash that you would love to tell the world. Think of one and thank God for it.

THE PAST: Sinful spiritual baggage.

We bring much baggage, emotional and spiritual baggage, and much other baggage.

A question that I ask couples when they come to me for counseling prior to their wedding is: "Do you have debts that you bring into the marriage, and if so, do you know each other's debts?" I have been surprised by some of the answers. One bride-to-be said, "I don't have any debts." The groom's head spun toward her. He reacted sharply, exclaiming, "What about all that money you owe on credit cards?" She said

innocently, “But, I don’t think of that as debt.” He nearly shouted, “You owe nearly six thousand dollars!” They needed to talk! They were not ready for marriage!

We play spiritual games like her financial denial. We know that an attitude or a behavior is sinful; we know that God calls us to a more wholesome life. But, we can’t change. We cannot let go. We are not persuaded of the benefit from the new life with God. We cannot go with God. Deep down, submerged under the reality, we know that God does not approve and probably offers better, but the familiar is familiar. It feels good and comfortable even if we hate it, while the new reality to which God calls us is scary.

Think of Jonah. Many of us know Jonah’s experience, because we live it. Jonah realized that God was sending him to Nineveh to call the people of that city to repentance. He did not want to do it! Those people in Nineveh deserved God’s wrath. They should get with they earned! Nineveh was to the east. What did Jonah do? Went west—until he ran out of land. Then he took a boat! He knew in his soul what God wanted of him, but he wanted his life. He wanted the life with which he was familiar. He could not let himself trust God for his future.

It is intentional that early in our service today, we had a confessional period. The confession is an acknowledgement of the power of past sin. It is a public admission to each other and to God that we bring smelly garbage to church. Even if we appear in a tuxedo or ball gown, we admit that we have not showered enough.

Christians know that we have to take care of the past before we can move into the future with peace in our souls and mental freedom to do what God calls us to do. As the Apostle wrote, “You were called to freedom....” Freedom from the negative past is God’s dream for us.

Spiritually speaking, what do you need to take care of that is left over from 2005? I will pause again, suggesting that you offer one spiritual matter, one sin, to God in repentance and confession.

THE FUTURE with the Spirit

Just as God wants a role in processing our past, God goes with us into 2006. Matthew wrote as part of his Nativity Story, “Now all this happened in order to make come true what the Lord has said through the prophet, ‘A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called Immanuel’ (which means, ‘God is with us’).” People who experience God with them are blessed. As we enter 2006, think Immanuel.

A man phoned me because he was upset. He had had a major set-back at work. He just needed to talk. He wondered what his future might be, considering what his boss had told him. Should he start looking for another position? He had many years with the company; should he stay with the job? We talked for a long time. He vented his failure and worry. Then, I asked him if he would like to pray about it over the phone. He said, “Yes, I would like that.” And we did. This is an example of processing life with God as the significant person with whom we share life.

In our text, the Apostle Paul referred to living this way as living by the Spirit. As we enter 2006, let us go with the Holy Spirit! Let us live with God as the most significant person in our daily contacts. The God who came in Jesus in Bethlehem, who died on the cross to demonstrate the offer of reconciliation, the God who promised to be with us as friend, counselor and co-worker, that same God is with us! “Lo, I am with you always to the close of the age.” Whatever the future may bring, God is with us---Immanuel!

The Apostle Paul urges that we live by the Spirit. That is his way of saying that we live by God, not by the desires of the flesh. By flesh he is not limited to sexual appetite. Read the list and we get the sense of what he means: When we are filled with the Spirit of God, when we are motivated by the Spirit, then we are able to resist the urges of the natural self. We either no longer need to go there or we can say “No” because we have “Yes” to say.

You have heard the text read from the NRSV. Here is how it is paraphrased in the Living Bible: I advise you to obey only the Holy Spirit’s instructions. He will tell you where to go and what to do, and then you

won't always be doing the wrong things your evil nature wants you to. For we naturally love to do evil things that are just the opposite from the things that the Holy Spirit tells us to do; and the good things we want to do when the Spirit has his way with us are just the opposite of our natural desires. These two forces within us are constantly fighting each other to win control over us, and our wishes are never free from their pressures.

But when you follow your own wrong inclinations your lives will produce these evil results: impure thoughts, eagerness for lustful pleasure, idolatry, spiritism (that is, encouraging the activity of demons), hatred and fighting, jealousy and anger, constant effort to get the best for yourself, complaints and criticism, the feeling that everyone else is wrong except those in your own little group---and there will be wrong doctrine, envy, murder, drunkenness, wild parties, and all that sort of thing. Let me tell you again as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the kingdom of God.

What is the underlying theme? What is the common characteristic of these sinful inclinations? Self-indulgence for personal gratification. The "I" becomes too important. Life is about me. Whatever makes me feel good is good. That is where Jonah was---he did not care about the salvation of the people of Nineveh; he was concerned about Jonah. The themes of most TV shows and commercials encourage us to feel good and enjoy life, because we only go around once. Who is the beneficiary? Me. Always me. We even bring that orientation to worship. The question we ask is: what do I get out of worship? So, who is important? Me! But, worship by definition is what I give to God---oops! The Apostle urges us to be careful! Indulgence is a seductive destroyer! Indulgence leads us to bite and devour one another, to consume each other. Remember: indulgence of the natural inclinations often has a victim. The victim may be one's own body, because of eating the wrong foods. It may be relationships with family or with church people that are sacrificed, maybe even unconsciously. Always the relationship with God is ditched. Self-centeredness brings a type of death. But, the Holy Spirit brings life.

But when the Holy Spirit controls our lives he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness [Those all sound nice. Good qualities. The last one is the kicker for Americans. We don't like it because it counters our urge to indulge ourselves and consume others.] and self-control.... Those who belong to Christ have nailed their natural evil desires to his cross and crucified them there.

There is the Gospel! What is the theme? Well-being for oneself and the building up of relationships and people. The self-reflection and motivating questions that we ask are: Am I in harmony with God? Am I living under the control of the Spirit of God? Am I building loving relationships? Am I encouraging people? Am I helping lift people? The goals of daily living are infused with God and love. We want God to persuade us that there is worth in going to our Nineveh.

We go into 2006, sinners with a past and still sinners, but by the grace of God made saints. We know that our sins have been nailed to the cross and crucified with Jesus. Sin will not have the final victory! God will! We will by God's mercy! So in spite of the depravity around us and within us, we do not despair. We may be frustrated with ourselves, with family, friends and society, but we are hopeful. Our hope is in God, God who helps us release our negative past, in the idiom of the Apostle, to "nail them to his cross."

Enter 2006 with the Spirit of God the Father and Christ the Son present and real. Remember that you are called to be free of the control of the past and free to live by the Spirit. Process your good times, process your bad memories, process your sinful inclinations with God, process God's salvation through Jesus Christ. Make God as Spirit your partner every day in 2006! "If we are living now by the Holy Spirit's power, let us follow the Holy Spirit's leading in every part of our lives."

Let us be quiet for a minute to reflect with God upon living by the Spirit in 2006.