***GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO!***

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Texts: Ephesians 1:3-14 and Psalm 147:12-20

This is the first Sunday of a new month, a new year, and a new decade in some minds, though according to the calendar experts the new decade does not begin until January 1, 2021. Nevertheless a steady stream of “Best \_\_\_\_ of the Decade” has been flowing this last week – Best Actors, Best Athletes, Best Songs, Best Movies, Best video games, Best Books! We all know that the wise men were recognized in history for the best gifts at Jesus’ birth, and today is the eve of Epiphany when we recall the visit of the wise men and the presentation of their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the baby Jesus before they disappear into the night while the holy family flees to Egypt ahead of Herod’s Massacre of the Innocents. But with the return of the wise men and the end of these twelve days of Christmas and with each passing day into this new year, we stop looking back over last Christmas or last year or last decade, and start looking ahead to the days and year and decade and Christmases to come. With that forward looking perspective in mind, I wonder: what words might best express your outlook for the coming year and years? There are several possibilities to consider.

The first might be: ***It has to be better than last year!*** or more pessimistically: ***It can’t get any worse, can it!***If your last year or last decade was full of personal disasters, dire diagnoses, or chronic despair over world events, or if you are a Washington Redskins fan, then this may be a tempting saying to capture both your disdain for the year gone by and your hope for better days to come. It recalls the woes of the past in all their vivid bleakness, tends to forget the bright blessings along the way, but dares to embrace a glimmer of hope for the future. It recalls the promise of spring in the dark of winter, if winter ever comes. It is reflected in the words of the psalmist: *Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning*. It can sometimes get bogged down in the weeping of the recent past or the present and may wonder if the night will ever end, but it offers cautious hope for the future – for the day to dawn when there will be less reason to weep or perhaps even the possibility of real joy.

If that glimmer of hope seems impossibly optimistic to you and you are the incarnation of Eeyore, a true pessimist by nature, then something like, ***Another year, another disaster in the making!***might better fit your outlook. In Scotland last summer I heard of a woman who was a true pessimist, a dour Scot as they say. In the course of a particularly bleak and rainy spring, she was heard to say on the one day when there was bright sunshine: “Well, it can’t last; it will probably start raining again tomorrow.” Her rainy disposition could not appreciate the sunshine even for a moment. Such fatalism is blind to the blessings of God in our midst. It refuses to hope lest there be new disappointment.

The church has been plagued by such pessimism across the years. It finds expression in theologies that are more comfortable with doom and gloom than with good news, and in those who want to scare the Hell out of you in order to make you more fit for heaven. It is more comfortable with law and judgment than forgiveness and grace, and seems to doubt God’s continuing, loving presence in our midst. It is perhaps best captured by that Puritan maxim: *If it feels good it must be wrong* or by that description of the University of Chicago: *Where fun goes to die*! But if the good news of the Gospel truly is good news, then there must be a better, more hopeful alternative to guide our steps into this new year.

The psalmist and the writer to the Ephesians offer another option for your consideration. It is perhaps best captured in the words that are sung at Christmas with the tidings of great joy for all people: ***Gloria in excelsis Deo!*** Glory to God in the highest! For the psalmist it is praise rooted in the litany of wonderful things that God does for us, things that we often take for granted:

the joy of children and the blessing of food,

the wonder of weather – not only in the cold and snow of winter but in the blossoms of spring,

the strength and guidance God offers for our lives day to day,

and the peace God grants to our hearts.

In all of these the psalmist finds reason to praise the Lord. Day in and day out the psalmist praises the Lord for the blessings of that day and all days , and calls us to join all creation in God’s praise.

A minister in the Church of Scotland had a reputation for opening his prayers with some reference to the weather. “Lord, w*e thank you for the beautiful sunshine,* or for *the gentle rain that waters the earth,* or *for the signs of spring all around us,* o*r for the wind that freshens the air*; one particularly raw, gray, nasty day his parishioners were eager to hear what he might say in his prayer, and he began: *Dear Lord, we thank you that every day is not like today*. Even on the worst of days, that pastor and the psalmist find good reason to praise the Lord.

“’The antidote to despair is praise,’ writes James Howell, “and I would add ‘and community.’”[[1]](#endnote-1) In praising God together we acknowledge that God is with us – there to hear our praise and our prayers as we lift them to divine ears, but in praising God we also count some of those blessings which might otherwise be taken for granted. Praise for God is rooted in the blessings of the day and of our lives, but it is also firmly planted in the soil of hope that we hold for days to come, hope not just for ourselves, but for our community and all of creation.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul suggests that our calling is to “*live for the praise of God’s glory*.” “*This is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people*,” he writes, “*to the praise of God’s glory*.” We who are redeemed in Christ have reason to be joyful, reason to hope, reason to praise God with our voices, with our actions, with our very lives! To paraphrase the first question of the Westminster Catechism:

*Our chief end or purpose as human beings is*

*to glorify God and enjoy God forever*!

What a wonderful calling and purpose for living – to glorify God in what we say and in what we do and in how we live and in who we are as those who are created in the image of God, saved by Jesus Christ, and loved by God without end beyond the end – and then to enjoy the blessings of God day to day!

God claims us as God’s own people, God’s own children. God saves us and grants us hope through Jesus’ life, death, and glorious resurrection. God continues to bless us each day and to be present with us by the Holy Spirit. God promises that nothing, not even death, can separate us from God’s love. And when we have drawn our last breath, God promises that there is a heavenly home that awaits us and a resurrection in which we will share. That good news, those tidings of great joy for all people, give us reason to praise God all our days – on days when all is right with the world but also on days – and there seem to be a lot of them lately – when all is wrong with the world.

In these first days of this new year when there is so much uncertainty about what will happen – and what won’t – make these the words that guide your choices and color your outlook and sustain your spirit with confident hope, come what may: *Gloria in excelsis Deo*! Glory to God in the highest! In the morning when you awake and in the evening when you lie down: *Gloria in excelsis Deo*! In your life and through your life, in your work and in your play: *Gloria in excelsis Deo*! In war or in peace, regardless of who is elected president this year: Gloria in excelsis Deo! In good days and bad, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow: *Gloria in excelsis Deo*! For better or worse, for richer or poorer: *Gloria in excelsis Deo*! For you and for me in 2020 and beyond: *Gloria in excelsis Deo*! Glory to God in the highest! And peace to ALL God’s people on earth! Amen

1. James C. Howell, *The Beauty of the Word*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2011, p.44 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)