***A FRESH START***

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January 12, 2025

Texts: Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 3:15-22

It is a new year and time for a fresh start – at least that is what we tell ourselves each January. The trials and tribulations, disasters and failures of last year are behind us, and we can look forward to a new year as an opportunity for something different, something better perhaps. That is what New Year’s resolutions are all about – commitments to be better this year in some way, shape, or form – which often have to do with some new shape or form. Have you made any such resolutions for this new year? As we gather here two weeks into 2025, I wonder how many of your resolutions are now broken, amended, discarded, or exiled to the island of misfit joys! Perhaps that is why one friend told me that he makes the same resolution each year – he resolves not to make any New Year’s resolutions, and he is wholly successful in keeping it!

There are, however, a great many folks who look to the new year, not as an opportunity for a fresh start, but as one step closer to the next disaster. For some, that sense of impending doom is a response to world events – the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, fires in California, the increasing impact of climate change. For others it is concern about the volatility of an incoming president who has promised retribution against his perceived enemies and has refused to rule out military action to take control of Greenland and the Panama Canal. For others the fears are more personal; after the loss of a spouse, parent, or child, uncertainty may abound about what life will be like day to day without them. For still others, it may be a diagnosis last year that has made this year look less rosy. A new year has dawned, how are you feeling about it?

For the people of Israel living in exile there was little hope that a new year would offer anything better than the old year. Carried off from their homes to a foreign land, they saw little possibility that the new year might offer anything good and wondered whether God had abandoned them. Perhaps the perspective for many was akin to that of the war veteran whose home was destroyed in the California fires this week; after shedding tears for his loss, he lifted his head and declared, “I’ve survived a war; I can get through this!”

Into that mix of uncertainty, anxiety, and despair, Isaiah brought a word from the Lord that offered a glimmer of hope:

*But now thus says the LORD,*

*the one who created you, O Jacob,*

*the one who formed you, O Israel:*

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;*

*I have called you by name, you are mine.*

Far from abandoning the people, God asserted that continuing claim over them as their Creator and redeemer, their God; that promise had been first spoken to Abraham and Sarah and was affirmed at the foot of Mt. Sinai through Moses. Our New Year’s resolutions may be like pie shell promises – easily made and easily broken – but not so with God. God’s promises endure – through thick and thin, good times and bad, at home and in distant lands, in freedom and in bondage, in 500 BC and in 2025 AD – God’s promises endure! Those promises not only reasserted God’s claim upon the people of Israel, but also offered hope for the future, despite their exilic circumstances:

*When you pass through the waters I will be with you*, says the LORD.

*The rivers shall not overwhelm you; the fires shall not burn you.*

*For I am the LORD* ***your*** *God, the Holy One of Israel,* ***your*** *Savior.*

***You*** *are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love* ***you****!*

*Do not fear, for I am with you!*

Those promises did not predict immediate relief from exile, but they did offer hope and reassurance that would sustain the people until Cyrus finally sent them home. Paraphrasing that California war veteran, those people in exile who heard the prophecy of Isaiah may have found the strength to say, “God is with us; we can get through this!”

And perhaps we can too, for those same promises endure for us. We too are precious in God’s sight. We too are loved by God without end. We need not fear what this year may bring, nor be anxious about the years to come, for the LORD is with us! Always with us, even in the seemingly god-forsaken places and chaotic times in which we may live. That is not a promise that there will not be challenging times ahead, but it is a promise that we will not face those challenges alone; the God of our ancestors who created us and claims us and sent Jesus to save us, is with us! “*The enemy of our faith is not doubt but fear*,”[[1]](#endnote-1) writes Craig Barnes. And the bedrock of our faith is God’s promise to be with us, a promise that should ease our fears and grant us good reason to hope!

“*I am the LORD your God. You are precious in my sight! I love you!*” Those are the words of the Lord that flowed from the mouth of Isaiah. “*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*” Those are the words that flowed from heaven upon the newly baptized Jesus as he embarked on his ministry. It is one and the same God who speaks those words; the same God who loves us and claims us proclaims Jesus as beloved Son and Savior. As we heard throughout last month’s Advent season, he is Emmanuel, God with us. In Bethlehem, he is God with us. In the waters of Jordan, he is God with us. On the highways and byways of Galilee where he taught and healed, he is God with us. On the cross and at the empty tomb, he is God with us. And by the power of the Spirit, he is God with us still – even here, even now – with us to encourage and comfort us, to cast out our fear and to strengthen us so that we can confidently say, “We can get through this!” whatever the “this” may be!

Today seven of our folks come forward to be ordained and installed as elders for this congregation. They do not know what lies ahead for them, anymore than any of us does. But they have agreed to serve, trusting that God will be with them in these coming days and years to guide them in leading this congregation. Together and individually, they trust they can do this, because God will be with them. Hear then what they have to say about their sense of God’s presence with them:

*6I have felt God’s grace, accepted Jesus as my Lord and savior, and seen the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in the world through the Covenant community and all the other church communities we belonged to…. I sometimes find that I don’t realize I am being called until after I accept. (Bob Stripling)*

*I believe God’s Spirit is with me each and every day. It gives me courage and the knowledge that God listens to me, and loves me, and protects me…even when I don’t fully understand the path God is showing me…. I trust that God will guide me, carry me through any hardship, as long as I am faithful and loving…and when I falter or forget, it’s okay. I believe God will forgive me and allow me to try again. (Dori Walk)*

*During this past year, God has been a steady hand guiding me along a path of discovery. Has it been simple? NO!! Has it been easy? NO!! But I know God has been with me…. What a journey – and God isn’t finished with me yet!! (Jane Wimmer)*

*God is working through each of us in highly individualized ways. God wants us to engage in Kingdom work when and how we can. It is unfathomable that God invites us, each of us, to participate in His work here. I learned that this work is more about shaping us than it is the care receivers. Our outreach to others is a gift to us while also a means to glorify God. (Clay Robinson)*

*For me, faith is a lifelong journey and struggle as it is for most. My faith has always been an important part of my life…. I strongly believe that God has given humanity free will to make our own choices and mistakes. Moreover, I believe as people we are God’s instruments in this world to hopefully alleviate suffering and provide comfort to others. Showing love and compassion towards every living being is one of my goals as is understanding and learning more about the Christian faith. (Linda Tenney)*

*I believe in a God who is loving, kind, and open to all…. God has always been a part of my life. As I reflect on major life experiences that may have shaped my faith, the spring of 2014 comes to mind. Between March and the first of May, we had a failed adoption, my dad’s battle with mental illness ended, and Kevin had a partially detached retina. If ever there was a time to question my faith, that was it. While my Dad’s death was the most traumatic, it was also the time where my faith was most evident. I felt the Holy Spirit surrounding me and felt peace through the numbness. I have often wondered how I was able to be so accepting of how Dad died, and it has taken me years to recognize that the acceptance came through faith. (Sally Griffith)*

*God says “Do not fear. I have called you. You are mine.” God is saying, “I am with you….” That doesn’t mean it’s not fiery hard! When we’re in trouble or going through difficulties we may be nervous that God won’t be with us. But God says, “You are precious to me, honored, and I love you….” So things may be outside your control, but you will see God’s grace. Perhaps in someone or several someones who walk with you. (Janet Surratt)*

In this new year we walk this path together, trusting that God is with us every step of the way to guide us, comfort us, strengthen us, and save us. Perhaps then our New Year’s resolution should be this: to trust the promises of God, and so to say in the face of whatever comes, “**We can get through this - together!**” Amen

1. M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor As Minor Poet*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2009, p.99 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)