

On the Doorstep of the New Year (2 Peter 1:3-8)

I don't know about you, but I sense greater anticipation for the new year coming in a few days than I remember in years past. The new year has always carried with it the hope for new beginnings, a fresh start, out with the old, in with the new. But there's some urgency in these longings this time around. This has been a challenging year, to say the least, and folks everywhere are glad to put this year behind them. We have seen the fragility of the human condition up close, we've seen the degradation of humanity across the country, we've seen some of the best of humanity in acts of selfless, tireless service, but we've also seen some of the worst of humanity on several levels. Perhaps as never before, the hope for humanity is an open question in the minds of many. We peer cautiously ahead not sure of what's to come.

In the face of this, I would remind you that the incarnation of God in Jesus is the ultimate validation of humanity. This act was and is a divine endorsement of our value and continually serves as an investment in the future. As we consider this, we might say that "no expense was spared" in God's effort to put right what had been corrupted from the original design. There has always been inherent value in our being since we are created in God's image. No one created in that image deserves degradation, but it has come despite God's intent. Yet we are not helpless against it, for the full resources of heaven have been discharged to rescue us and reverse the outcome of humanity's withdrawal from God's life and love.

This rescue, anticipated since Eden and variously pictured in the history of God's engagement with Israel, was finally realized in the appearance of Jesus, the Christ, whose birth we have just celebrated. He, both the source and model of our rescue, shook up the pre-suppositions and expectations of people in his own moment in history. And he continues to do so through those in whom Christ lives in our day. The rescue is still unfolding and it follows the same pattern Jesus laid down in his day.

In Him we saw lives touched at the point of need—sometimes very obvious, sometimes known only to God—and those lives were changed for the better which put them in the place of influence for being the threshold of true life to those discovering its absence in themselves. The woman at the well in a Samaritan village was the means of influence towards that entire village when her life was touched by the Savior. The Gerasene Demoniac became the poster child for what the power of God could do to change life. He was the means of influence in an entire region which later came to experience the touch of the Savior themselves. A man born blind, healed by Jesus, became the means of influence in his village. Refusing to be drawn into theological debate with skeptical religious leaders, he simply bore witness to what had happened to him—this I know, once I was blind, but now I see. Saul of Tarsus, once a vigorous opponent of Jesus, experienced grace, and, as Paul the apostle became the means of influence in his day and in our day still through his writings, leading people to the threshold of true life. Peter, the author of our passage today, once rough around the edges, impulsive, unlearned by the standards of his day, confounded the supreme court of his day to argue for life through Jesus. The court was perplexed at his knowledge but noted that he had been a companion of Jesus.

People like this have been present in every generation of humankind since the time of Christ, bearing witness to the claims of Christ and influencing their circles for Christ. There are people like this in your life and mine today who paved the way for your and my confession of faith. Were we to recount how this influence prevailed, the evidence would lean heavily in the direction of the kind of life they live day to day. Very few instances would highlight their theological brilliance as though they had solved the one objection that prevented faith. Maybe a sticking point was resolved, but that would merely have been the tipping point supported by a life that exemplified the message. The credibility to share the message of hope was gained through the daily evidence of its truth in a life lived in the same setting, facing the same challenges, confronted by the same temptations as any other, but with different outcomes.

This, friends, is the great adventure of following Jesus, because this is the way God works: one life influencing another; this is what God makes possible; everyone in Christ is

eligible to participate in this endeavor, and the field of play is wherever you are. Our part in this is to be as well equipped as possible given the available resources at hand.

We've already mentioned the coming new year. In our day and culture this is generally a time for reflection and resolve—we make resolutions describing how we will change in the coming year. What if, this year, you resolved to be an agent of change in the coming year adding value to the human condition in service of God's plan for creation renewed? Is this ambitious enough? Does it seem beyond reach? Recall what we have just celebrated in the birth of Jesus—did that seem beyond reach to those involved? From a human perspective undoubtedly so, but God was behind it and the angelic announcement to Mary put it into proper perspective by saying: No word from God will ever fail.

Now consider what Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and on the basis of his own experience, says to us: God's divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life—to what end? So that we will be effective and productive in our knowledge of our Lord, Jesus Christ. We have gained this through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. We have received very great and precious promises—among them: the gift of God's indwelling Spirit, forgiveness of sin, right standing with God, union with God right now, eternal life, and grace—the working of God's power to accomplish in and through us what we cannot do in our own power. Remember, God spared no expense to make these a reality in your life.

Because these promises are your present possessions, Peter goes on to say, make every effort—in other words, do whatever it takes knowing that you have the capability for this in the power of God resident in you—make every effort to add to your life these attributes that allow the gift of God to flourish in you so that your life will have influence as an agent of change promoting God's purpose in putting the world right again.

The virtues that follow all represent decisions, or choices we make in terms of how to approach life. Goodness has to do with good moral character, privileging the best aspects of human behavior. Knowledge means increasing our understanding or grasp of God and God's purposes in creation. Self-control is the reining in of impulses, it is forming sound spiritual habits. Perseverance means patient endurance—literally remaining behind, staying with something or someone until God's purpose is realized. Godliness refers to piety, or reverence towards God and equally important, the things of God, or the things God holds dear. Brotherly kindness is another way of saying warmth and friendship, support or encouragement. And love here is the giving of self for the benefit or well-being of others. There is much more that could be said about each of these—I urge you to explore these further because I want to speak to a couple of implications this line of thought suggests.

The first has to do with how we cultivate these attributes. Holding these attributes in mind—and bear in mind that these are meant to be attained concurrently, not consecutively—what settings support these, who displays these attributes, what resources develop them, what opportunities prompt them? Your reflection on this becomes a guide to the kind of places you frequent, the person or people you want to spend time with, the resources in which you invest time, and the opportunities of which you avail yourself. This is a kind of personal training you pursue—you make choices to be where these attributes are honored and practiced. You choose to be with someone or a group that displays them and you engage in conversation about it—how have these traits been developed in you; how does the gift of God live so pervasively in you? You study—and here is where your grasp of God's word helps, for it not only informs your understanding, it points you in the direction of others who develop helpful, reliable resources for growth in Christ. You remain attentive to opportunities that will allow you to put into practice the attributes forming in you. Training prepares you for the moments that matter as you participate in God's mission for renewing creation.

And that brings us to the second implication I want to touch on with you. Where are we meant to display these attributes for the sake of influence? Earlier we mentioned everywhere you are, which is true but very general, and, we have a disconcerting tendency to compartmentalize our lives, so let's get specific: in your household, among your social circle including your social networks, as you do your daily work whether in the home or away from it,

in your politics, the causes you support, the entertainment you enjoy, your wealth management, your free time, in your congregation, and in your community. What's your reputation like in these arenas? Would goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love help you to be an agent for change in these settings? How much could our world change under the weight of a movement of people bringing these attributes to bear on the issues that arise in the settings we've mentioned? Remember friends, these are people empowered by the Spirit of God who bring the gift of God into every place they are. According to God's own word, it makes a difference.

Being these kinds of people represents the continuing presence of Christ in the world announcing the present reign of God, demonstrating in themselves the life and character of God, teaching the true knowledge of God, expressing the love of God in their actions towards others, working towards the redemption—tangibly realized—that God created, inviting others into the life of God, delighting in the outcomes of God's plan as they anticipate the coming fullness of God's promise. This, friends, is the way forward in the coming year and every year thereafter. This is what we're made for. This we can do in the power of God. AMEN