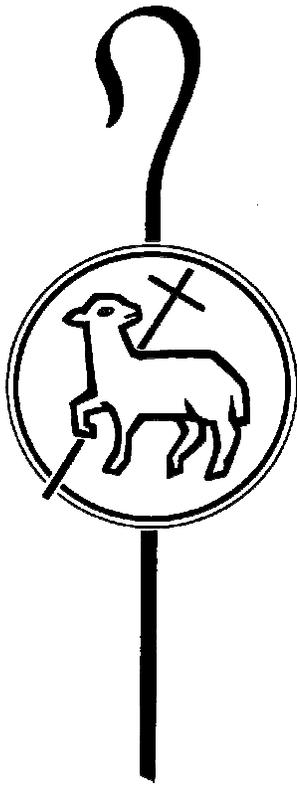


feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading . (Isaiah 40:11)

January 3, 2013

Dearest family,



Blessings for the new year! Though we had a small crowd on Sunday with so many of you away, we had a good time together of worship and Word. Given the circumstances, I delayed finishing the introduction to the Psalm Pseries until next message, and instead focused on an immediately relevant issue at the end of another year. The fact is we are consumed by time passing and often threatened by time that's yet to be. Our experience in the present is hemmed in by the events of the past and also by the expectations of the future. At the end of a year and the beginning of a new one, most people's thoughts turn to think about such matters. In the last few days, I have already been in conversations in which people have been talking about what they did or did not achieve on their life "to do" lists for 2012. The past has been assessed. I have listened to others speak about their feelings about what is ahead of them and their families in the new year. The future has been anticipated. In both scenarios, it is not all roses – it is also about thorns. The backward look revives memories that are both endearing and endangering, both good and bad. The forward look provokes both hope and

fear, both high and low expectation, both positive resolutions and negative disclaimers.

There is something about the end of a year that serves as a salutary marker. It forces us to stop and look at ourselves and consider not just who we are but where we are, and where we are going and what we are taking there with us. It's a good time to check the baggage we are carrying on this journey into the future. I have received emails and telephone calls from many folk in the last few days, whose responses to these very considerations have led them to contact me for a chat, for a safe conversation, to get a sense of position, a sense of perspective, a sense of the prospective. This is a godly impulse, to want to visit these places.

We know this time of year as advent. But as Christians, our understanding of the full meaning of advent embraces all the dimensions of our experience of time: past, present and future. At Christmas, we celebrate the fact that Jesus **came** in the historic past. In our present, we celebrate the experience of a Spirit-filled life by which Jesus **comes** to us, and we anticipate a future advent, Jesus is **coming again**. So I would simply suggest that we ensure that our lives are undergirded by the truths of these three advents. It is impossible to look at the past without knowing that Jesus came to deliver us from the finality of the consequences of past sin and failure, bondage and brokenness. It is impossible to live in the present without acknowledging all that has been made available to us for present life and godliness, for present protection and preservation through the ministrations of the Spirit of Jesus. It is impossible to consider the future, as a Christian, without reckoning on the fact that the future includes the second coming and a judgment. These realities are seldom on the table when most people make their future plans. If they were, there might be some very different approaches to decision-making and planning. There's nothing wrong with long-term planning as long as it is managed with short-term attitudes. How did James put it (4:15)? "If it is the Lord's will we will live and do this or that."

Our lives disintegrate when there is no spiritual integration of our past, present and future. A wrong or unresolved view of either our past or our future will impact and influence our experience of the present for the worse. Uncertainty about what has passed or anxiety about what is to come will condemn any-

one to fear and fruitlessness in the present. The way the enemy of our lives seeks to control our future is by simply binding us to anything unholy in our present, and thus guaranteeing perpetuity of his rule again tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. Praise the Lord that today is the day of salvation when those demonic determinations can be broken and the enemy's grip on our future can be broken.

On Sunday, I began by referencing the Thessalonians. They had some concerns. Was the future a hopeless end or an endless hope? What could they be assured about as far as their future was concerned? Their sense of purpose in evangelism, in reaching others, and their sense of edification, taking spiritual care of themselves, were being eroded. Given the threats of temptation and sin, the ever-present fears and anxieties, the loss of boldness and conviction, why does Paul assert the future advent, the return of Christ? Because he knows first of all, that any work of the Holy Spirit that effects our present experience will always both warn and prepare us for our future experience. Secondly, such an awareness will help us to continue to live faithfully in our future, because it motivates us to live lives that are:

- **Cleansed:** as John put it, everyone who has this hope purifies himself (1 Jn. 3:2-3)
- **Consecrated:** it is a great incentive for being totally set apart for Christ's purposes
- **Comforted:** faith and hope are encouraged because it is God and not governments or gods who have the last word
- **Committed:** it completely settles the nature of our commitment to spiritual things and to spiritual work. It is mainline not a sideline. It is 100% not a 10% tithe mentality. No one put it more clearly than Jesus himself: "Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning like men waiting for their master to return...so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him... It will be good for that servant whom the master finds so doing when he returns..." (Lk. 12:35-48)

Between 1 Thess.3:13 and 4:13, both verses that speak specifically about the final advent, what do you read about? It's all about how to live in the present. The facts of the future inform our present. For too many people, the past informs their present more than the future. It is when you are delivered from the accusations and bondages of the past that you can at last experience a sense of future hope. The bondages of the past are exchanged for the blessings of the future. Because the future advent brings accountability, warning, incentive to holy living, it is not surprising that this passage is an urgent exhortation to Christian living in three specific areas of everyday, ordinary life, that are all about a healthy and holy relationship with oneself and with others: **Sexual purity** (4:3), **Brotherly love** (4:9), **Personal work and faithfulness and diligence** (4:11). It's interesting to note that all these areas of your life will become affected if you lose a sense of where you have come from, of your past, or where you are going, your future. When there is a loss of direction or assurance you begin to drift.

Our main discussion was based on Philippians 3:12 – 4:1. This is Paul taking inventory and I'm going to briefly suggest three components of the way he does it that might be instructive and helpful to us as we weigh and consider time passed and time to come. Paul brings three things to the table in this process. Sadly, I do not have the space to elaborate on these three main points. I really encourage you to download the message as the explanation of each point will help to give you a framework for doing your own personal inventory. The three things Paul brought to the process were:

1. A correct estimate of himself (neither operating out of pride nor presumption and taking measure of himself in accord with faith and giftings)
2. A concentrated focus (by dealing rightly with the past through godly remembering and forgetting he was able to have an unobstructed view of the future)
3. A consuming desire (the whole process is infused with a passion for Jesus)

Paul is not telling us how to hang-glide when we go off the fiscal cliff or any other cliff or fall for that matter. Are there reasons for being concerned about what the next year holds for us personally and nationally and globally. You bet! What is our posture going to be in the face of whatever transpires? How do we prepare for it? Just as I've suggested that Paul exemplified. Listen to his summary of the outcome of this kind of spiritual inventory process: "*Therefore that is how you should stand firm in the Lord,*

dear friends.” (4:1) Fiscal cliff? No, firm ground. We know who we are; we know where we’re going.

- Have you reckoned the final advent and the judgment seat of Christ into your future plans?
- Have you taken care of the baggage that should not be traveling any further with you into a new year?
- Have you asked the Lord not just to search your heart by His Spirit but help you examine yourself under his tutelage? Are you open to a correct self-estimate?
- Do you have a right relationship with your past, both in remembering as well as forgetting? Any things you need to remember to provoke worship and thanksgiving? Anything to forget? Anything that remains undone? Needs to be completed? Any obedience? A promise or vow? A commitment? A forgiveness? Are you ready for a concentrated focus on what is ahead that is freed from any distraction from the past whether good or bad?
- Are you resolved in your pursuit of Jesus Christ, in your passion and desire for him and his will for your life, more than anything else?

If you can answer affirmatively to all these questions then the Word promises that you will not be blown off your feet this year, or fall off a cliff, but will indeed stand firm.

I want to wish you all a very blessed new year. Yes, we will be facing many challenges and issues, but how we face them will be determined by the direction we are facing: forgetting what’s behind and forging ahead. What are you taking into 2013? What are you leaving behind? What are you remembering at the end of this year? What are you choosing to forget?

Remember the way that the Lord has led you....forgetting those things that are behind...press on... heavenward...as we eagerly await a savior from there.

Pastorally yours,
Stuart

<http://www.christourshepherd.org/pastlet.htm> (and follow links to download MP3 audio of sermon)