

## **Pastor's Message - New Year's Day (23)**

Revelation 21:1-6a

With Christmas Eve on Saturday last year and Christmas Day on Sunday and then cold temperatures, dangerous wind chills and drifting snow, there were a number of churches which cancelled their Christmas Eve and/or Christmas Day worship services. I did get one text asking me if the Waupun United Methodist Church services would still be offered.

I had no idea how many people would attend Christmas Day services after Christmas Eve or on Christmas Eve for that matter. I was optimistic for Christmas Day, but attendance is unpredictable. And this weekend, with New Year's Eve last night and New Year's Day today, I also wasn't sure just how many people to expect.

We are in competition with the culture and competition is stiff. I expect that many folks in the Congregation observed the coming of the new year in some way last night, but, to our advantage, many of our folks are now older and don't stay up to watch the ball drop at midnight anymore or party into the wee hours of the morning. Maybe in our context, the demographic of our church is to our advantage.

Maybe, competition is not the point. Maybe the point is that Christians, too, mark time; and New Year's Day is a good time to look back and forward with eyes of faith in company with one another and with God. What should this first worship service of the new year look like: covenant making, celebration and thanksgiving or prayer?

Methodists have a long tradition of making covenant, sacred promises, with God at the new year, although most do not currently practice covenant making in the rigorous way of the early Methodists. Our hymnal has the vestiges of the covenant service in the prayer that begins, "I am no longer my own, but thine." John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, left journal entries that give us a glimpse of the size of gatherings to which he preached and the sense of the powerful work of grace.

Today gives us a strong leaning toward tomorrow. And tomorrow is the stuff of prophecy. "The days are coming ..." proclaimed the prophets. Such prophecies were often uttered during dark and dismal days in Israel's history when not only the present but also the future looked bleak. But "tomorrow" was one way the prophets kept Israel's faith alive.

Tomorrow is one of the keys for understanding Christianity, too. We explain it something like this: When you embrace the way of Christ, you enter the kingdom of God, which is already here in some ways. But you also inherit the hope of the kingdom to come, where God's love and power will

have full sway, where all wrongs will be righted, and where there will be neither sorrow nor suffering anymore.

No one knows what tomorrow will bring. Jesus said in Matthew 24.36, "no one knows the day nor the hour," but with Christmas Day only a week ago and still in the Christmas season today and for another week, we believe that the day of the Lord has already arrived.

I've kept a great story in my bag of stories which I want to share with you today.

A man who absolutely hated his wife's cat decided to get rid of him one day. He drove the cat 20 blocks from his home and left him at the park. As the man arrived home, the cat was walking up the driveway.

The next day, the man drove the cat 40 blocks away. He put the creature out and headed home. Driving back up his driveway, there was the cat!

The man kept taking the cat farther and farther away, yet the cat would always beat him home. At last, the man decided to drive a few miles away. He turned right, then left, past a bridge, then took more turns until he reached what he thought was a safe distance from his home and left the cat there.

Hours later, the man called home to his wife: "Jen, is the cat there?"

"Yes," the wife answered. "Why do you ask?"

Frustrated, the man said, "Put him on the phone. I'm lost, and I need directions!"

We may not know when or what will happen along the way, and like the man in the story we need direction. God offers direction. Jesus Himself says that He is the way, the truth, and the life and those who follow Him know the way. All we have to do is put our faith and hope and trust in God and we know our ultimate destination – maybe not the exact directions, but the way nonetheless.

The way may be rocky and there may be detours or rockslides or avalanches that misdirect us for a while, but the end is in sight. The kingdom of God is already here and tomorrow has come. The kingdom of God is the ultimate tomorrow. It's the goal of history and the reward of the faithful. Its coming is up to God. But between today and that tomorrow are the nearer tomorrows. Those who follow Jesus have the opportunity to lead the way and make sure the doors are open for all for those tomorrows and that the path to spiritual fulfillment is well marked.

Where is known. When is still unknown, but we can get there from here.