

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, January 1, 2023

Isaiah 63:7-9

I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord,
the praiseworthy acts of the Lord,
because of all that the Lord has done for us
and the great favor to the house of Israel
that he has shown them according to his mercy,
according to the abundance of his steadfast love.
For he said, "Surely they are my people,
children who will not act deceitfully,"
and he became their savior
in all their distress.
It was no messenger or angel
but his presence that saved them;
in his love and pity it was he who redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

And just like that we've crossed over into a New Year. Just like that, the 365 days that structured so much of our lives belong to a year gone by. A New Year has dawned and it's unfolding even now, minute by minute.

But here's the catch, our lives, as folks whose lives have been claimed as God's own; our lives are not primarily governed by the New Year as set by the civil calendar. Now, of course, we partied last night. There are a few empty seats here this morning because of the folks who just couldn't quite make it out of bed this morning! There were champagne toasts and "Happy New Year" texts sent out at 12:01am on the dot. A ball dropped in Time Square New York and fireworks went off on Beale Street. There were, in the tradition in which I was raised, "Watch Night" services to pray in the New Year, born of the tradition among my ancestors who in the midst of the Civil

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, January 1, 2023

War watched by night for the dawn of freedom. A New Year has dawned and it's unfolding even now, minute by minute.

But we, who follow after Christ, are caught in a bit of a dilemma. Our lives, these lives that are lived after Christ, are ordered by the liturgical calendar, and then the civil one. And if that is still true, and I know it is, because I have to keep changing these stoles every few weeks, then our New Year as those who belong to the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, was about 5 weeks ago as we gathered to celebrate the first Sunday of Advent.

Our New Year began just over a month ago with the start of the first season in our liturgical year, Advent. And now we move into the season of Christmastide, those twelve days of Christmas that will end in a few days as Epiphany, the next season in the year of our faith draws near. And before long we'll have observed Transfiguration and Ash Wednesday and before you know it we'll be in the throes of Lent, and you and I will be praying that there's no shortage of Easter chocolate to fill baskets this time around. A New Year has dawned and it's unfolding even now, minute by minute.

And whether we adhere with fierce loyalty to the liturgical calendar or just make our way day by day following the civil one, what we know to be true is that after 365 days no matter how you count it or order it or holidays you use to punctuate it, so much has unfolded. So much has occurred, we've experienced so much, prayed for so much, rejoiced so many times, cried over so many things, grieved so many losses, born so many disappointments. So much has occurred in this year of our lives; and it can almost seem foolish to celebrate the dawn of a New Year when so much remains unresolved, and so much lies ahead in this New Year, unknown, uncertain, and unrealized.

Just like that a New Year is here, unfolding minute by minute, already asking us to respond to what lies ahead.

Already bringing with it questions that compel us to answer: What does this year mean for my faith and my faithfulness? What does it mean for my doubts and my questions? What does it mean for my hopes and worries and my insecurities? In what state does this new year find me, or more precisely, how do I encounter this year? Do I have enough faith for what it will call me to do, how it will call me to live, to love, to serve, to give? The New Year is here, already demanding of us a response.

It's the Prophet Isaiah who I believe can be helpful this morning as we begin figuring out what our response shall be. It's Isaiah, or more accurately the third person who picked up where Isaiah left off, who slows down his prophetic proclamations to offer a message of faith and hope to a people in the midst of a transition, people trying to figure out what comes next.

Indeed this writer enrolled at the "Isaiah School of Prophetic Preaching" takes a look around and sees that these folks who have recently returned from exile only to be faced with the sobering reality that life on this side of things isn't as great as they had hoped for and expected. Only to be faced with an existential hell where economic oppression and political corruption and

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, January 1, 2023

communal uncertainty have conspired to deaden their sense of what's possible and their view of what God is up to, this writer decides that these folks need to be reminded who is with them in the midst of the transition they are living through.

And so, this writer at the "Isaiah School of Prophetic Preaching" puts pen to paper and begins to brag on God. "I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord" This writer begins to brag. Bragging about the works of God and the power of God, the strength of God, the mind of God. Bragging about this God who has been faithful. This God who has called Israel their own. This God who has drawn near in the midst of their suffering, affliction and uncertainty.

And though we who have gathered in this place on the first Sunday of 2023 may not be recently returned from exile, though we may be far removed from the context in which this word first comes forth, though we may not know what it means to endure that peculiar kind of suffering, what we can admit is that we are in a transition. And it doesn't take a New Year for that to be true. Our lives are always in the midst of a transition.

Our lives are always balancing themselves between what is and what will be. And so too our faith is always wrestling with how things are now, while pointing toward that eschatological hope bound up in Jesus Christ of what can be, of what God promises us will be. That sure and certain hope that we each got a front row seat to seeing just a week ago on Christmas Eve, that hope which never fails to be born into this world that is reeling in darkness and brokenness. Our lives are always at a pivot point, a transition. And so Beloved, the question we must wrestle with as Howard Thurman raises for us is this: How do we pass through the coming year with a faithful heart?

This New Year with 12 months that promise to bring with it losses and gains, hopes and worries, promises and disappointments, loves and betrayals, this year that promises to test us and stretch us, even as God promises always to be the One shaping and molding us. We must figure out for ourselves: How do we pass through this coming year with a faithful heart?

These words recorded in the Book of Isaiah, point us toward a few possible practices that might help us out as we figure out our response. As we try our hardest to be faithful. And they are simply this: A practice of Fearless Remembering of what God has already done, a practice of Fully Reorienting ourselves to a love of God and one another, and a practice of Faithfully Responding to what lies ahead. Fearless Remembering, Fully Reorienting, and Faithfully Responding.

Beloved, the only way that we might pass through this coming year, this year that is even now unfolding minute by minute with a faithful heart, is by first engaging in a practice of Fearless Remembering.

When this prophet begins their word of faith and hope to the people they begin not with the prevailing wisdom, "trust in the Lord will all your heart and lean not to your own understanding", nor with the admonition to "stand still and see the salvation that Lord will accomplish for you this day", no Beloved, the prophet begins by telling the story.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, January 1, 2023

The prophet begins by recounting the ways the Lord had made, the doors the Lord had opened, the sicknesses the Lord had made well, the brokenness the Lord had pieced back together. The prophet begins by taking a moment to remember. To remember what God had done in the past, because Beloved, if we are to face what lies ahead unknown our job isn't to figure it all out, our job is to call to mind all the ways God worked it all out for us and with us in the days gone by.

Beloved, what is your testimony for the year gone by? If you begin even now to remember what God has done for you, what story would you tell?

Perhaps you'd tell of how God kept your mind in the face of an event that threatened to shatter your mental health.

Maybe you'd tell of how God worked within your financial life and brought it to a place of stability that you couldn't imagine twelve months ago.

Perhaps you'd tell of how God gave you the strength to love a loved one who had hurt you, or to parent a child who had broken your heart.

Perhaps you'd tell of how God brought you back, back from the grips of addiction, back from a bed of sickness and affliction, back to faith after you thought your faith was gone.

Beloved, if you began to remember, what story would you tell? For we are called to remember, and to remember fearlessly. Not just the pretty pieces and well curated parts of our lives, but the messy, muddy, mundane, and messed up parts that remind us that we are in desperate need of a God who comes to be "with us." After all, that is what we celebrate in this Christmastide season of the liturgical year, that our God is Emmanuel, that God is with us. That our God desires to participate and get proximate to our lives, even our suffering, and accompany us along the way. It's what we proclaim alongside Isaiah, that "it was no messenger or angel but God's presence that saved [...]."

And so we remember, fearlessly, because in accurately recounting the story of our lives we remember to give credit where credit is due. And perhaps that is the first step in our journey through this New Year, that we begin with full knowledge of who makes it all possible. Fearless Remembering. And also, Fully Reorienting.

What I appreciate about this text is that it preserves a conversation between God and humanity. The prophet begins by saying, "Allow me to brag about God, allow me to remind you of what our God has done in the past." But then God enters the chat, and when God begins to speak God offers their own reminder, that God, from the very beginning has called Israel their own. "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal deceitfully." God's word to these folks who are living through an existential hell, who are dealing with economic oppression, political corruption and communal uncertainty, who no longer have a view of what God is up to, God's word to them is, "You are mine!"

But God continues speaking and reminds them, not only are you mine, but "I became your Savior. I redeemed you. I lifted you up. And I carried you." I saved you, redeemed you, lifted you up, and carried you all the days of old.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, January 1, 2023

You are mine, and not only am I with you, but I saved you, redeemed you, lifted you, and carried you;" all the days of 2022, and 2021, 2020, and the years and decades that have passed before your very eyes.

What if we took our cue from God, our God who has taken our lives and placed them at the center of their life. So much so that God would put on human flesh and come to be with us as Christ. What if we took our cue from God and began to reorient ourselves away from faith in things that will ultimately never prove to be as faithful as God is to us.

In the midst of their laments God sends a word to Israel that fully reorients them to the fact that God has never failed to be faithful. God has not slacked in their promise to save, redeem, lift up, and carry. What if we reorient ourselves to this reality, that though we do not know what lies ahead in this coming year, the way we can pass through it faithfully is by never losing sight of the promise that God will be present.

Perhaps that's why we give the liturgical year preeminence, because it reorients our relationship to time and in reorienting our relationship to time it reminds us of the One to whom time truly belongs, the One who separated day and night, who set the Earth on its axis and placed the stars in the sky, the One who is a restorer of years. The One who says we are their own.

Beloved, don't you ever trick yourself into thinking that God doesn't have faith in you. For all the things we are told to have faith in, what if we had as much faith in God, as this text shows us that God has in us. "*Surely* they are my people, children who will not deal deceitfully."

God knows fully how well we can get it wrong, and yet the word sent to Idlewild this morning by way of Isaiah's words to Israel is that we are called God's people, people who will not deal falsely, or faithlessly. But who will take the fact that they are God's people seriously no matter what this year may hold.

The New Year is already here Beloved, unfolding even now minute by minute. And our job is to respond to all that it will ask of us. So much of our response will be grounded in being able to fearlessly remember what God has already done in our lives. So much of that response will require us to fully reorient ourselves to the love of God in our lives and for this world. But finally Beloved, the response required of us must be faithful. It will require us as David says so often, to "Take the next faithful step."

Now, if I haven't lost you yet, and you're still paying attention, you'll notice that there's no more text left to consider. I've lifted up each verse of scripture, there's nothing left to reflect upon. The road has run out, and yet there is more to be said, and that Beloved, that's faith. The call to respond faithfully does not end when the text ends, our response continues even when we don't have a word left to say. That's why it's not just a response, it's a *faithful* response, a response that is fully reliant and contingent on God's power, grace, and love.

It's a response that recognizes though I cannot see where the road may lead, the next faithful step is enough. A response that does not prioritize being comfortable at the expense of where God is calling you. A response that trusts that if God is calling, then God is sure to carry

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, January 1, 2023

you and sustain you and provide for you and keep you. It's a response that compels us to see the reality of our lives and hold it in tension with the promise of God's future. And to work for the day when that future becomes our daily reality.

How will you respond faithfully to what this year brings your way? How will you respond faithfully to the needs that were here last year, and didn't change just because we changed the number at the end of the calendar year?

Beloved, there is much, much in this world, much in this city, in need of our most faithful response. Children in need of homes, and clothes, and stability and love, especially now that all the holiday cheer will begin to dry up. Elders in need of access to quality medical care and someone who will pay attention. Folks experiencing poverty in need of Good News and economic opportunity. Lives held in 201 Poplar in need of someone to have faith for them that they can be redeemed. Unhoused neighbors in need of a hot meal, a prayer, and a better civic infrastructure that doesn't make finding affordable quality housing so difficult. How will you, how will we respond faithfully to the needs that are waiting for us this year?

The Good News is that, we don't have to figure it out alone, and even more, we know where to begin. Today we begin at this Table. This Table where we commune with God and with one another. This Table where Christ shares with us the life and love that we are in desperate need for. This Table where we are fed, and nurtured and sent out into the world to respond faithfully to whatever lies ahead.

Beloved, this year don't make another fleeting resolution, but make these practices core to how you live out your faith. Remember fearlessly, all that God has done, including the parts that you're still learning to love. Reorient yourself fully to the love of God at work in your life and the life of each of us. And Respond faithfully to what lies ahead, knowing that the next faithful step is enough.

Won't you pray with me:

The new year is already here, unfolding minute by minute.

The new year is already here and yet so much of the past year remains.

The angst and anxiety and anger,
the uncertainty, the fear.

My confusion will undoubtedly deepen, my worries grow with each passing day.

And the angst that hangs so thickly around me
threatens to find its way into me,
into my heart,
into my way of seeing,
into the way I believe.

And so I pray that you may grant me the grace to pass through this coming year with a heart

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, January 1, 2023

unencumbered by anger,
unburdened by fear,
unshaken by doubt.

I pray, "Grant that I may pass through this coming year with a faithful heart."

For the new year is already here, unfolding minute by minute, and I sense it calling me

to encounter what lies unseen ahead,
to respond to the deepening of life all around me,
to commune with those who surround me,
to become fully human as I make the decision to share each day with another soul, that I
finally recognize as beloved.

"Grant that I may pass through this coming year with a faithful heart",

that hope may be my covenant,
that my spirit may awaken to your presence in the faces of each person I meet,
that love may be the resounding refrain of my days.

The new year is already here, unfolding minute by minute.

"Grant that I may pass through it with a faithful heart."

Amen.