

Second Sunday after Christmas, C
Jeremiah 31:7-14
Ephesians 1:3-14
John 1:1-18

Pastor Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon
January 2, 2022

Happy New Year! And blessed Second Sunday of Christmas. Today we continue to navigate a kind of suspended between-time, between holidays just past and a new year of activities yet to come. We leave behind the busy crush of December and prepare to welcome the fresh start of January. It is a good place to be this morning. A place for faithful reflection and a place for hope.

This holiday season has a way of evoking memories, both happy and sad, loving and difficult and awkward – memories to reckon with. This year, because my mother and father have died recently, family memories have really been flooding back and sparking personal reflection for me. When we went through their house this summer, we came across so many photos of Christmases growing up. From cute photos of us little kids opening presents around a 1960's style Christmas tree, to cringeworthy teenage photos with my sister and me wearing gosh-awful 1970's outfits and scowling self-consciously at the camera. I will say this: You could not pay me to go back to those awkward days! But none of us escapes them, do we? We all have to work through the seasons of discomfort to grow into who we are.

But you know, memories can sometimes play tricks on us. For example, I remember my mother as the perfect Christmas hostess. She decorated our house beautifully, bought gifts and wrapped them attractively, she baked special Swedish and German Christmas cookies (and somehow got us to help), and always served a delicious Christmas dinner... all of this while teaching high school full time and raising three kids and being active at church, with a husband who traveled a lot. When I became a mother myself later on, I could never seem to achieve that level of holiday perfection at my own house, I could never measure up to that image I remembered, and I used to beat myself up about it. But one time I asked my mom, "How did you do manage to do all that, every Christmas?" And you know what she said? She said, "Well, I cried a lot." Huh! It turns out those Christmases were not as perfect and carefree as I remembered them. And as Mom and I talked a little more, I learned that my mother never felt liked she measured up either. I'm glad we had that conversation while we could, that little conversation about what it means to be human amid unreasonable expectations.

Memories can play tricks. Memories can accuse and condemn us, when none of that is warranted. Sometimes I look back on my younger self and just shake my head. Yet I also

I wonder, as this new year dawns, when we will be able to love ourselves – really love ourselves -- our past selves, our present selves, and our future selves – love ourselves with the kind of embracing, accepting tenderness that God loves us with. Maybe today could be a day to begin.

New Year is traditionally a time to make resolutions. We try to become a better person – exercise more, eat better, quit smoking – and that’s all very good. But it does seem to me that our resolutions usually tend to focus on what we see as our failings and flaws. Resolutions tend to be about becoming more perfect, according to whatever ideal we aspire to. And I am wondering on this early January day, if there is a more loving and less judgmental, more grace-filled way that we could greet the new year with all the challenges and possibilities it brings. Something deeper than self-improvement and self-discipline. Something rooted in the God who loves us through and through and loves this earth from age to age.

A good place to begin is with today’s scripture, that cosmic Christmas poem from John’s gospel. There are no angels or shepherds or wise men, and it doesn’t even mention a baby. But this passage is John’s Christmas account of how God’s Word, God’s message, God’s wisdom, has become human in Jesus.

*In the beginning was the Word— that is, Jesus-
and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...*

Scripture pictures the human race waiting throughout all the ages for a Word from the Creator. Waiting expectantly, waiting in great need and great longing. We know what that longing is like. The waiting ended when Christ stepped out of eternity and was born into time. Jesus became God’s living message communicating God’s heart to us.

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory,
the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.*

In Jesus we have been personally introduced to God’s Eternal Love that holds this entire earth in tenderness, and always has, and always will. In Christ, God’s Eternal Love embraces our battered planet and embraces every living being, including you and me.

This is why we worship God on a chilly Sunday morning in a fresh new year. In worship we find our own connection with God’s eternal love and goodness. In worship we honor God’s Living Word, we bow in humility as people have done since ancient times, we meet the Holy One in bread and wine, as our Lord has invited us to do throughout generations.

Today, we place our own lives in the context of eternity. And it does our souls good to know that God's Love extends well beyond our own personal timeline -- be that a timeline of 10 years or 20 years or 50 years or 75 years or even 100 years. God's Love began before time existed and will continue into infinity, far beyond the memory of any living being. Seasons of our lives will come and go. Human conflicts will come and go. Political movements will come and go. Even viruses will come and go. Yet God's Love endures forever.

God's Love wraps around and permeates the timeline of the whole human family. God's Eternal Love is greater than all of us-- and yet, in Jesus, God's Love has become one of us. God's Love – love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things – has entered human history and has also entered into each of our own personal histories, to become a part of us.

And God's Love stays with us to bring us along in God's saving work. God's Eternal Love helps us as we make our own feeble attempts to love each other. God's Love forgives our failures and strengthens our best efforts. God's Eternal Love blesses the ways we try to show kindness to the people nearest to us. And God's Love multiplies our care for all people in need and magnifies our effort to bring justice to everyone, to people we don't even know. God's Eternal Love holds us and guides us, fills us and along the way brings us true joy.

On this chilly Sunday morning we do not greet the new year alone, depending only on the power of our self-discipline and our desire for self-improvement. Instead, we greet the new year in the beauty of God's tender compassion for us and all people. Today we pause in a spirit of amazement and humility, to welcome the cosmic Love that spans the ages and – amazingly – enters into our now, our present, this moment in time, this life we are living today.

What a privilege it is that the Eternal Christ chooses to come to us. How will we welcome Eternal Love into this moment and this day?

I'd like to suggest a gentle and loving way. It doesn't come from making elaborate resolutions to measure up or improve ourselves. Instead, it comes from paying attention to where God's Eternal Love has been leading us already, and asking God to help us participate even more fully in this Love that moves the stars and redeems the universe.

I invite you to reflect for a moment on how God has already been moving in your life.

In the past few months, where have you already been sensing hope and encouragement, in the midst of this earth's dark struggles? That is God with you.

Where have you sensed that you are growing and changing? This is God's activity.

Where does it seem like you're making some progress? This is God leading.

Take a moment to consider what activities have felt the most meaningful to you, the ones that connect with your sense of purpose and calling. What would it take to give those things more time and space in this new year? That is, what would it take to give God the opportunity to move more freely in your life, to lead you more deeply into Eternal Love and Grace?

The Living God of Love is already working in you—so why not let your hopes for the new year follow from there. Wherever God's love is already bearing good fruit in you... that's a place to give more time and space to God's eternal, loving presence.

Dear people of God, as we greet this new year, it isn't necessary to develop an elaborate self-improvement plan. The only thing necessary is to be as open as we can to God's love which stirs throughout the universe and stirs even in us, thanks be to God.

Receive this blessing ...

Let us go into this new year, with holy love;
Let us go into the world, as peacemakers;
Let us go into the community, as healers;
Let us go into conflict, without fear;
Into work, with patience;
Let us go into foreign territory, with curiosity;
Let us go into friendships, with laughter;
Into family, with tenderness;
Into self, with forgiveness.
And may the blessing of God most holy,
Be with us all, now and in the year to come. Amen. *

(Special thanks to Rev. Lois Pallmeyer and Rev. Bradley Schmeling of Gloria Dei Lutheran in St. Paul, MN for sharing this final blessing online – it has been adapted a bit.)