

Sermon Text: Luke 2:22-40

Now, you will notice in the bulletin a little announcement, and this is part of the sermon, and not announcement time, that said that we are going to get together and pull together a men's church league basketball team once again, and we need to know by January 3. It goes on to say, "Help us come back from an abysmal season last year." That was my nickname – abysmal. I played for the first time ever and Main Street lost every game last year for the first time ever. I don't think those two are a coincidence. What we said, what every sports team says, at the end of season, "Just wait until next year!" Well, it is next year, and I think I'll do my part by not playing at all.

I also remember a few lectures from coaches over the years about, you know, don't worry about next year, in fact, don't even worry about the playoffs, don't worry about the next game, you better worry about tonight. You better play the game you're in. Now, the Bible says that, too, in a different way. It says this is the day that the Lord hath made, you find a way to rejoice and be glad in it. That's my translation. You find a way to rejoice and be glad in the day that God has made and given. It is next year NOW! Play the game you are in, and find a way to be glad in it. You see, I know that can be difficult for some of us. I have a problem projecting forward. Now, that is not the same thing as planning ahead. I don't have a problem with that. I have a problem projecting forward. I mean this. I go to see about one movie a year, and I saw "Star Wars" whatever the latest one was, and I can't help it, but the very minute I sat down and it began, I looked at my watch, and I wondered how long is this thing going to be. Projecting forward. I failed to enjoy the film; maybe some of you did, because I was really wondering how long this thing was going to be. Some of you have the same sort of problem. You project forward, and you miss a lot of what is happening right now in front of you, and the people right around you now. Life happens in the moments! We live in the moments, and we also live in the presence of God, and we need to realize, to make a very bad pun, that only Bill Fitzgerald will get, that the present is a gift. Find a way to relax and to rejoice and to be glad in it.

We miss so much of life by looking at our watches! We may even miss a decent sermon that those who have ears hear, by looking at our watches. We live in the moments with our spouses and with our children. Don't miss those moments by looking at your calendar and projecting forward to the next project at work or what have you. We can, if we're not careful, project forward all the way through our lives, and not actually experience anything, except wondering if the next thing might be better. Live in the moment! God is present, and because God is present, all moments are potentially holy, even the ones we dismiss and project beyond and fail to feel could be holy.

I remember thinking, very distinctly, when I was about 12 years old, if only I can make it to age 12, if only I can live to age 12, that when I get to be 12, I'll be more or less grown up! I remember thinking that I will be different in ways I can't imagine. I will change schools, and when I get there, I will change classes. I will have four teachers instead of one. When I got to that new age of 12, and when I got to that new grade and that new

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

January 1, 2006

school, it was not wonderful. It made my stomach hurt. I was that little kid, who always got an upset stomach the first week in a new school.

Erma Bombeck tells a story that I love of a little boy, who's about age 5 or 6, named Donald, who was afraid of going to school, and Donald said this, “My name is Donald, and I don't know anything. I have new underwear. I have a loose tooth, and I didn't sleep last night because I am worried. What if the bell rings, and a man yells, “Where do you belong?” and I don't know? What if the trays in the cafeteria are too tall for me to reach? What if my loose tooth comes out and our heads are down and we are supposed to be quiet? Am I supposed to bleed quietly? What if I splash water on my nametag, and my name disappears, and no one knows who I am?” Surely, such fears are for children. I wish that were true.

We face a brand new year – 2006, and we project into the unknown, and many of us wonder and many of us worry, what if? What if things are so different that I cannot cope? What if my _____ dies? What if my job ends? What if my investment tanks? What if my son or daughter comes home and says fill in your fears? The question and the worry is always will I be able to? Can I reach deep enough, high enough? Can I bow with humility low enough? My answer is yes, with God's help, you can. With God's help, you can.

There are two ways to greet this New Year. One is, “Oh no, another year! Another year!” You expect it to be very much like other years you didn't enjoy either. Or, “Thank you, Lord, for another year. I shall make good use of it! Thank you, God, for another year and the exciting possibilities! I shall make good use of it with your help!” Too often, we're like Charlie Brown from the comics. Charlie Brown said once, “I have developed a new philosophy. I will dread only one day at a time.” That's not it. Maybe a new year is a good time to dispense with old dreads and old bad habits like borrowing tomorrow's troubles and not living in the day that God has given you.

You know, Jesus himself said much the same thing. He said, “Your heavenly Father knows what you need,” in Matthew 6. Your heavenly Father knows what you need, but strive first for the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these other things you need will be given to you as well. Then he has an equal sign in verse 34, “So.” I read that as an equal sign. “So do not worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.” The King James says, “Sufficient unto the day is the worry thereof.” We can translate that all the way down to live one day at a time.

A new year is a good time to begin trusting God more than your fears, more than your preoccupation with what happens next. Trusting God more and noticing people more is certainly a better way to live! Some people live in constant fear that somewhere out there a tragic something is going to happen, and I know that many of you live that way.

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

January 1, 2006

My daughter, Alison, things have come easy to her for her whole life. She said that the day after Christmas. Our family was gathered together. We all kind of had the flu. We were sitting around moaning. She sort of perked, and she said, “You know, my whole life things have come sort of easily to me.” Everyone else in the room looked at each other and said, “Duh!” because we all knew that. Alison is not one of those who think because it’s been easy up to this point, something horrible must happen. There are people who do, many of us who do, think that way.

Once a man was awakened by his wife. She said, “I hear a burglar downstairs!” The man got up, sleepy and grumpy, and he wandered downstairs, and sure enough, he walked straight into a burglar, and straight into the barrel of a gun, who demanded to know where all the valuables were, and he gathered them up and he gave them to the burglar. The burglar was about to leave, and he said, “Wait, just one minute!” The guy turned around. He said, “Before you go, I want you to come upstairs and meet my wife. She’s been expecting you every single night for 30 years.” Some of us are like that. We project forward negative things that may never happen, and we don’t live in the day.

Jesus said, “So don’t worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today. Live one day at a time.” It is true that each day has troubles of its own, but each day also has some potential for joy because God is in it, and God is greater than our fears and more importantly, God is greater than our guilt. Many of us are plagued by old guilts. We needn’t be. We needn’t be. There are some practical steps each of us can take to conquer the spirit of fear that assails us and also the spirit of guilt.

First of all, focus on today, not tomorrow and not yesterday. Some of us are crippled by the mistakes of the past. Some of us lie awake at night reliving past humiliations and anticipating the consequences of the past misdeeds and regretting the tragedy of missed opportunities. No teaching is more clear in Scripture than this one, the past is gone. It is gone, and though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Paul advises in Philippians 3:13, “Forget those things that are past.” The psalmist says, “As far as the East is from the West, so far has God removed our transgressions from us.” They are gone. Now, move on. We cannot do anything about yesterday, but we can do something about today. We can resolve from this day forward that I will trust God and pray for discipline and growth beyond whatever that one bad attitude is or that one bad habit is, and continue to pray, continue to grow.

Guilt can only be constructive if it leads to growth and change, beyond something which can be grown beyond or changed. Guilt about the past and misery about it can be a self-indulgent sort of misery, and you get stuck in it, and that’s wrong. God has forgiven. You can forget and move on. You are not finished yet. You may grow beyond it.

I love, there’s a little-noticed piece of Scripture in 1 John that hardly anyone ever sees, and it says, “Whenever our hearts condemn us, we must remember that God is greater than our hearts.” My heart was made for more than guilt. My heart was made for more

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

January 1, 2006

than regret and bitterness and keeping score. My heart was made for God, and God made us for each other, and it is not a good thing to be alone. We learned that in Genesis, and too many of us are alone, living singular lives, focusing on secret, private fears, and dwelling on secret, singular guilt from the past, and it's draining us dry, and we can't enjoy the moment in which we live.

This New Year might be the year to fully accept God's forgiveness and grace, and to feel cleansed of all that old garbage that has stunk up your soul and polluted your life! The New Year, the time to move on, to move on and out of the stuck places that you hate, but at least they are familiar to you. You can't stay stuck forever! And as I get older and older and older, I realize advancing years are God's way of saying, "Choose wisely how you spend your time because your supply of days is limited."

Paul wrote to the Philippians church about growing. He says, "Not that I have already attained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me His own. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have made it my own, perfection, but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press toward the goal. I press onward toward the goal, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal. I'm not finished yet. Christ calls our church also to press on and to fulfill the dream that Christ has put into the founders of this church, the dream that we are to fulfill in this community.

When Jesus began His ministry, the first thing He did was announce His mission. He said the spirit of the Lord is upon me because He anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed. Jesus understood what He was here for. We need to understand what we are here for.

Second, if we are to grow, we have to reach out. This is one very clear message. Jesus called His followers to reach out. He never called us to place all of our attention on just our buildings, our budget, our comfort, or ourselves.

Third, we have to build up our children's Sunday School. We are the people of the book, the Bible. It is to be a part of our lives in the worship service and in the children's classes and in the children's education and Sunday School. That's where it happens. That's where they learn the great stories and the great things, and becomes the background of their lives and faith. If we do not build up our own children, we have failed to be the church in a very basic way.

Fourth, we must pray. We pray for our members. We pray for ourselves. We pray for the marriages and the families here, for our loved ones who are sick. We pray for those who grieve. We also must pray for our neighbors who do not go to any church. We must pray for our enemies because when we pray for them and then forgive them, we free our own hearts of bitterness, and we become more able to enjoy life ourselves. We are to

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

January 1, 2006

pray, Scripture says, for our national leaders and our world leaders. Pray for guidance in the decisions they must make and for the priorities that you must make when you make your decisions. We need to pray for the new officers at Main Street UMC, and pray for the influence of God’s spirit to guide us as we lead.

Fifth, we need to share from what we have to share – our time, our talents, our money, but also our wisdom which we gain from pain. Each of us has things that we have learned from the school of hard knocks. I don’t if people still say that, but the school of hard knocks. Each of us knows stuff because we learned it the hard way.

You know, once a woman was having trouble with her car so she took it to the garage, and she asked for an estimate on the cost for fixing it, and when she acted surprised at the high cost, the manager told her you have to remember, that price includes parts and labor. She asked how much it would cost without the parts and labor. Well, everything costs. It costs us to know the things we know. It costs us to make it this far in our life and faith. We need to share what we can share. We need to move on beyond the cost, and use the wisdom we have to help each other grow because we grow in the sharing. We get out of our faith what we put in. I am closing. I understand that some of you were here last night, as was I, until midnight, and it’s time to come to a close. We do get out of our faith what we put in it. We need to put in new things and new effort so that we get more out.

There’s a good story with which I’m going to close about a minister who arrived to preach at the pulpit supply at a little country church, and he noticed the collection box at the doorway, and he thought it was for mission work so he put a \$20 bill in. After the service, one of the deacons approached, and thanked him, and said, “You need to understand that we really cannot pay you for preaching today, but we have a box in the back, and if anybody is especially helped by your sermon, then we tell them to put some money in there, and we’ll give you whatever is in the box. I’m happy to tell you that today there was a \$20 bill so here it is with our thanks!” The minister smiled, and he took it, and he went his way, and when he got home, he told his family the story. His smart-aleck son remarked, “Well, you know, Dad, if you had put more in, you would have gotten more out!” We get out of our faith what we put in. What God wants us to put in is our whole self, and not project forward and think that next year is going to be just like the year before. We are children of the God who can make things new. God can and will redeem all of us, our pain, our money, our guilt, our bitterness, and our talents and our enthusiasm and our organizing skills, what have you. Put it all in, and let go of the secret miseries and the regret and the worries that keep you from joy in each day which God gives you. Put it all in, and see if you don’t have more to share and more desire to share as well. Now, God is not finished with any of us. We grow from here. Happy New Year! May God display in each of our lives new things in this year to come. Amen.