

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"A New Year With Jesus"  
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January 1, 2012  
New Year's Day

You probably know as well or better than I do how much Christmas is a mixture of so many traditions. It has the pagan roots of the winter solstice, with its many celebrations, some of them deriving from the lack of food during the famine months of early winter, to the fermentation practices of Europe culminating in the days that are darkest, that is, the ones that have the least daylight and the most drinking. The Scottish solstitial celebration of Hogmanay some say comes from the old Scots "Yule gifts" and included a "first footing" bringing of luck in the new year festivities, including giving gifts of salt, coal, shortbread, a black bun or fruit cake and of course, scotch. The new year's celebration was a break from other cultures that began their new year in the spring. It also was a reformation break from what was seen as the Roman Catholic holiday of Christ's mass (Christmas). This celebration was a festival of the end of darkest days, and the beginning of new light, as were many such solstice holidays around the world.

So we have this strange cluster of holidays, even stranger it appears, when Christmas Day and New Year's Day occur on the Lord's Day. The calendar year is an unusual year to follow, unless we consider the above. Most of us follow the school year, particularly if we have or have had children. The beginning of the year in this calendar begins just after Labor Day and goes until the end of June. The Church new year begins with Advent, which is usually the end of November or the beginning of December and concludes with Christ the King Sunday often right after Reformation Sunday. Other cultures follow the agricultural norms of the Spring being the new year.

Well, so much for calendars. In N. America, we tend to think about the end of the year as a time to review the year's news and as a time to consider personal change, as in resolutions. Drinking and partying often also mark the end of the old year and the beginning of the new.

But as we worship in yet another year of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, 2012, we begin today with this central relationship. What will do this year to cultivate that relationship with Jesus? What courses will we take? What events will we attend that will help us grow in our commitment to Christ and his ways in the community?

Everyone who is here today is here because they want to start out the new year with Christ, I hope. If not or if so, here is a moment to say “yes” to him in your heart and mind. “Yes, Lord.”

We read the Scriptures, we pray the prayers, we listen to the preacher and we once again place ourselves in that honorable place of following Jesus. He is the One the prophet Isaiah calls “a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, a royal diadem...” in Isaiah 62:3.

Jesus is the One we praise in Psalm 148, along with all creation. He is named in Galatians as the Son of God, the king, fully God and fully human, who receives by adoption as his children. God places his Holy Spirit in us to comfort us and teach us and remind us we have a heavenly dad who loves us and wants our best, better than any human rendition. We are heirs of God, royal children, not slaves or abused property.

We witness Jesus having given himself for us to become like us in this Christmas season. We experience the holy family moving from Bethlehem and going to Jerusalem some time before they escape to Egypt, away from Herod's grasp.

We hear Anna and Simeon prophesy over baby Jesus. I wonder why we don't have them in our nativity scenes, before the magi. Nevertheless, their voices are clear and crisp in Scripture.

Simeon says he has received peace in seeing Jesus, the person of Jesus being the salvation promised to the world in the fulfillment of all the promises of Messiah. Even in the Temple, he boldly notes that this Jesus will be Saviour for both Gentiles and Israel. He says he can now die in peace, knowing and seeing God's plan. And we are to have that same peace as we look at Jesus and study him, learn from him, love him.

Did you notice that Mary and Joseph were “amazed” at what was being said about Jesus. Their own miraculous visitations of angels a few months ago, their own being visited by shepherds in the barn, and all that they had experienced was still not enough for them to grasp everything that this child meant. And how could they grasp it? Simeon blesses the holy family and yet warns them that not everyone will receive Jesus for who he is. Many will fall and rise because of this child. This is then as it is today. Many

reject Jesus. Many give their lives wholly and unreservedly to him. Simeon continues with his warnings: One of Jesus' major ministries throughout history is the next phrase of Simeon's prophesy: The thoughts of many hearts are revealed by Jesus.

We are not only to look at our outward actions, but our thoughts, our attitudes, how look at others, at ourselves. All this Jesus helps us to consider. Some will speak against Jesus, use his name as an often chosen swear word. But those of us who are not afraid to confront our own thoughts, our own attitudes, our own inner life, whether stable or unstable, beautiful or ugly, for us, Jesus speaks his words of peace and mercy. His name for us is a refuge from death and destruction, from filth and abuse.

Simeon continues to warn finally with a word to Mary. Your heart will be pierced. And we don't know how much Simeon knew of the most difficult ending of Jesus' ministry by being tortured to death. His mother would see it, which is another type of torture.

And then Anna, who we only know from this passage also prophesies over the child, as the One on whom rests the redemption of Jerusalem. She sees Jesus as Messiah, as the long awaited one. Did you notice that she is a prophetess, recorded in Scripture, as one who worshipped night and day, fasting and praying, fervent in her faith. She was not despised as an 84 year old. No. She was honoured, as the Lord honours all who do not consider their years as a reason to retire from the faith, but rather a whole new season to exercise their faith. No matter what you feel like in your 80s or 70s or 90s or 60s or ..., it is never too late to exercise your trust in God and in Jesus as Anna did.

And I've been reading for my courses in Florida. One of the books was written by a Puritan Minister named William Perkins, late in the 1500s. It is surprisingly contemporary. It is about prophesying, which he took to mean preaching God's word to the people. He reminds ministers of their high calling and reminds us all that there is a word in Greek for those who are God's messengers as their life long calling. It is *angelos*. Very similar to the Spanish Los Angeles. "Angelos" means "messenger" but from it we get the word angel. And so I remind you, when I am away, that you have an angel in Rev. Dawn Griffiths to care for you, to teach you, to direct you, to look after your spiritual concerns. Take advantage of the prophet God has given you, the angel God places among you. It is more than paying her

properly, which I believe you have done. It is receiving her as from God. We don't take enough time to really consider this. If we did, we might take better advantage of those who labor among us with the Gospel.

Be sure you take advantage as you begin the election of elders here while I am away. Be sure you ask the questions that you have well in advance and fulfill your part in this process. The Church is only as strong as you choose to make it by caring to be a part of all these things. Choose this new year to serve and care as never before, as God gives you grace to do so.

And enjoy what God is doing here, and in your lives, as you trust him together. See you in March.

Let us pray.