

January 1, 2023 - Sermon Title: Expectations for the New Year - Lori Lower

OT Scripture: Isaiah 43:18-19

NT Scripture: Ephesians 4:22-24

TOD: The only way to get the full potential out of a thing is to be in relationship with the person who created the thing. Donovan Donnell

Welcome to the New Year – Welcome to 2023!

For some, the New Year is a way of saying goodbye to the previous year and looking forward to a new year. What are your expectations for 2023?

Do you look at it as being able to turn over a new leaf as you turn over the page on the calendar? Or open a new calendar as the case may be. Do you see it as a clean slate, as a way of starting over, beginning again?

We've probably all made New Year's Resolutions at some point in our lives. Most often they have to do with our physical health – to lose weight, eat more healthfully, exercise more, stopping a bad habit, etc. And we've probably all broken our well-intended resolutions within the first few days (or even hours) of making them. Certainly our “resolve” is not strong enough to handle even the most realistic expectations we place on ourselves.

Or maybe you've started to go with the new trend over the last few years of picking a “word” for the upcoming year. The last word I picked in 2020 before the pandemic hit, was hope. I didn't even bother picking a word for 2021 or 2022. Perhaps I unconsciously carried that hope with me over the last couple of years. Coincidentally, I've chosen “Joy” to be my word for 2023. We'll see how that goes.

Perhaps you pick a verse or verses to represent what you'd like to accomplish over the new year. I'm seriously considering a couple, but I haven't landed on one yet. Which leads to my progression of thought for this message - with each passing year and the older I get, I think what I, what we, should be focusing upon is our *spiritual* health. Now is the perfect time to have a spiritual check-up or check-in with God, our creator, the Great Physician. And maybe our resolve – our resolutions for the year – will be more successful if we ask for God's help and provision.

Let's look at Ephesians 4:22-24. Actually, I'll start in verse 21.

21 Since you have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth that comes from him, 22 throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. 23 Instead, let the Spirit *renew* your thoughts and attitudes. 24 Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy. (NLT)

I like how the Passion Translation renders verse 24:

For God has *re-created* you all over again in his perfect righteousness, and you now belong to him in the realm of true holiness.

So what does renew in verse 23 mean?

I did a word study on “renew” using Strong’s Concordance and what I found was very interesting. The Greek word for renew is a derivative of the word renovate. I’m not going to try to pronounce it, but the word begins with two syllables that are repeated. An, An – which in looking at the cross-reference, for the compounded word, it is implied that it is repetitive or continuous.

The Expositor’s Bible Commentary states that Paul was reminding the Ephesians that “they were to be *perpetually* renovated in mind and spirit.”

Ashland Seminary professor, David deSilva says about the Ephesians passage “Ephesians offers guidelines about behaviors that reflect the “old nature” that is “corrupted by deceitful lusts” and therefore not a reliable guide to be followed and about the behaviors that proceed from the “new nature.” Because of their general nature, they cannot be mistaken for a new law but rather offer a resource that will help the self-examining disciple perceive which nature he or she is *nurturing/cultivating*.” The heading deSilva uses for this section in his NT survey book is **walking in newness of life**.

What I’m trying to point out is that this is a process – putting on the new nature, thus the ‘ing’ in walking, nurturing, cultivating. Another commentator states that “although we have a new nature, we don’t automatically think all good thoughts and express all right attitudes when we become new people in Christ. But if we keep listening to God, we will be changing all the time.” Interestingly, they go on to say, “As you look back over last year, do you see a process of change for the better in your thoughts, attitudes, and actions? When we decide to accept Christ’s gift of salvation, it is both a one time decision, as well as a daily conscious commitment.”

I don’t know about you, but when I first came to Christ when I was six, I had this idyllic picture that I would instantly become Christ-like when I asked him into my heart. My utopian view of being a Christian continued well into my later years. Little did I know that this would be a life-long process and that it would be one “resolution” that I wouldn’t be able to fully achieve this side of heaven. And because it didn’t happen instantly, I felt like a failure.

About two weeks ago, I worked my way through a YouVersion Bible Study that was called “All Things New” with Kevin Olusola, of the music group, Pentatonix. I highly recommend this study. He highlighted a “new” thing on each of the seven days – New Light, Focus, Identity, Joy, Spirit, Approach, Future. He was joined on the days’ video devotional on New Approach by his podcast partner, Donovan Donnell, who made a remark that hit me right between the eyes.

*The only way to get the full potential out of a thing is to be in relationship with the person who created the thing.* In other words, to discover our purpose – for life, for a new year - we need to be in relationship with God.

Kevin also made this remark in the devotional for New Joy. “God is calling you to change your mindset. What perspectives do you need to shift, what endurance do you need to cultivate so that you have a lasting joy that’s not based off of a feeling, but faith in God – His processes and His promise?” Another interesting definition is of the word “cultivate” – to prepare and use, or to try to acquire or to develop.

As I was beginning to work on this message, I turned on a youtube mix of Christmas songs which was set on autoplay. Auld Lang Syne was one of the selections, which got me to thinking about the song and why it is sung for New Year's.

Auld Lang Syne is a Scottish poem, written by Robert Burns in 1788, that was later set to music. The phrase "auld lang syne" is literally translated to "old long since" in English and means something akin to "times gone by." The first verse might be familiar to you; "Should old acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind? Should old acquaintance be forgot and old lang syne?" It is thought to symbolize endings AND new beginnings.

Henry Ward Beecher, who was an American clergyman in the 1800's said, "Every man should be born again on the first day of January. Start with a fresh page. Take up one hole more in the buckle if necessary, or let down one, according to circumstances; but on the first of January let every man gird himself once more, with his face to the front, and take no interest in the things that were and are past."

I would suggest that we ought to spend some time in prayer and reflection – maybe today or tomorrow. Ask God what expectations He would like you to have for your life in the New Year and then set small, realistic steps that you can take to be in relationship with him.

Look back over the past year and take note of both the good as well as the disappointing things. Don't dwell on the low points, but use those experiences as a starting point to change your mindset.

I came across *The Great Annual Examen* recently that had some very interesting questions to ask of oneself. For those of you who are not familiar with the spiritual discipline of "examen," it is credited to St. Ignatius, who over 400 years ago, used to make a daily examination of the past 24 hours of his life.

After a General section, the *Examen* was divided into five sections of health: Physical, Emotional, Vocational, Relational and Spiritual.

Here are a few of the questions from the General Section.

Where have I most experienced the presence of God this past year and why?

In the past twelve months, where have I experienced the greatest sense of consolation (peace, contentment, shalom, beauty, etc.)?

In the past twelve months, what area of my life has given me the most desolation (pre-occupation, depression, anxiety, etc.)?

Those are pretty loaded and extensive questions, aren't they? If any of you are interested in the entire Examen, I can get you the pdf; just let me know. These three questions alone might be enough for most of us.

A way to cultivate a more intimate relationship with God may be to focus on a particular spiritual discipline that you feel you could improve upon. Some examples of these include meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.

There are varying lists of spiritual disciplines. This list comes from Richard Foster who wrote *Celebration of Discipline*.

Maybe you would like to spend more time reading the Bible. One way to start is by using the Our Daily Bread devotional or something similar. It begins with a scripture passage, along with a short devotional and a one or two sentence prayer at the end. We may have some copies still available in the lobby – they come out every 3 months. You can also sign up and have it delivered to your house or even in a daily email.

As I pointed out earlier, the YouVersion Bible app has Bible studies, both written or videos that include Scripture reading and devotionals that are set up for varying time frames that are on a variety of topics. For those of you who like “checkmarks,” it will check off the days that you have completed. But please don’t get hung up on this being a to-do list. You can set it up so that you are notified each morning of the verse of the day. What’s really neat is that I try to share these to Facebook each day – and my cousin in Florida is usually the first to respond to my posts. There are also other apps out there that have verse of the day notifications.

If more in-depth study might be appealing to you, I’ve found that there are many organizations that offer online video Bible Studies using books from various authors as the basis. I’ve done several of these. I’m actually signed up for one that starts January 16, called the God of the How and When.

Maybe you’d like to improve your prayer life – communication and conversation with God. I know I used to get frustrated that I couldn’t sit down and pray for hours at a time, but all you need to do is get started with maybe five minutes a day. Pick up a book of written prayers or work through an acrostic on the word PRAY. Start with small steps.

The BIC week of prayer and fasting is coming up next week. Mary has emails scheduled to go out each day with the link to that day’s selection. (I know that there are a couple of you who don’t have emails or computers; perhaps she’d be willing to print the booklet for you.) For this year and next, it will be focused on the Brethren in Christ Core Values. Which I would encourage, especially if you are new to the BIC.

Anyway, these are just a few suggestions to get you started.

My admonition or challenge to you is to set aside that time today or tomorrow and ask God what he’d have you to focus upon for this year and pick a doable step towards working on that goal. The lifestyle change that I’ve been involved with uses the 1% factor. Just focus on improving 1% each day. Exponentially that adds up pretty quickly (don’t ask me to do the math!) That involves changing your mindset from having to go all out – 100% perfect – all or nothing. And most importantly, when you experience a set-back or miss a few days – do not quit. Take a deep breath and continue down the path that God has set for you. Another suggestion would be to get an accountability partner – someone who can encourage you to keep going when you need it most!

I hope that this brief message has been the pep talk that you need to start off the New Year with expectation, anticipation and excitement.

I'd like to close by reading the Passion Translation of Psalm 32:8-9, which came up as the verse of the day in the YouVersion app this week.

*I hear the Lord saying, "I will stay close to you, instructing and guiding you along the pathway for your life. I will advise you along the way and lead you forth with my eyes as your guide. So don't make it difficult; don't be stubborn when I take you where you've not been before. Don't make me tug you and pull you along. Just come with me!"*

Let's stand as I close in prayer before we sing our closing song.

God, we come before you at the start of this New Year, with anticipation and expectations for what this year will bring. We ask that you lead us and we say "Yes" to what you have in store for us. As the Isaiah passage said you are doing a new thing - Give us fresh eyes to see you in new and exciting ways – in our lives and in our world. Help us to not be stubborn, but open to your leading by the Holy Spirit. Bring us to holiness, wholeness, and to health in You. Help us remember that you are our faithful God, who will continue to provide for us with strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.

Benediction from Ephesians 3:

***When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. (Ephesians 3:14-16, NLT)***