

PRAYER: I am the New Year. I am an unspoiled page in your book of time.

I am your next chance at the art of living.

I am your opportunity to practice what you have learned about life during the last twelve months.

All that you sought and didn't find is hidden in me, waiting for you to search it but with more determination.

All the good that you tried for and didn't achieve is mine to grant when you have fewer conflicting desires.

All that you dreamed but didn't dare to do, all that you hoped but did not will, all the faith that you claimed but did not have—these slumber lightly, waiting to be awakened by the touch of a strong purpose.

I am your opportunity to renew your allegiance to Him who said, "Behold, I make all things new." Amen.

New beginnings do not just happen at the beginning of a new year. They can occur with a romantic breakup, a move to a new city, a new job, a new child, or another life event. What new beginning am I experiencing now? How am I feeling at this point?

“Forget about what’s happened; don’t keep going over old history. Be alert, be present. I’m about to do something brand-new. It’s bursting out! Don’t you see it? There it is! I’m making a road through the desert, rivers in the badlands.” (Isaiah 43:18-19)

The stories in scripture show time and time again that God offers people a new beginning, another chance for great things. God frees the oppressed, Jesus heals and restores, and the Holy Spirit imbues new life. Many have situations that have caused rifts or fractures in family or friend relationship. Even at the end of 2021, things are still not good them. Differences of opinion, differences on how to proceed to get past the difficulty; Even the church faces challenges as we ponder how to honor the past and expectantly prepare for the future. Anger and hurt, threats even; it is sad to witness the brokenness of God’s people. It happens, I must have seen it a thousand times, but it is hard to watch from this vantage point.

Jeremiah had a tough job. It was a cold and windy period in the history of God’s people. There were enemies without and disagreements within. And as is so often the case when the prophets were called to speak, the people seemed to have forgotten who they were.

Or maybe not who they were, but whose they were. They had released their grip on the vision that had brought them through a wilderness; they had settled back from the hard work of living in the community that had given them an identity. They had abandoned the law that was handed them and chose to live by the law of convenience or circumstance, the law of every man for himself, the law of expediency and profit, of power and getting even. The law that felt good when feelings were raw.

So, Jeremiah was charged with poking them in those raw feelings, correcting them when they didn’t feel like they were doing anything wrong, or not doing anything that anybody else wasn’t doing. He had to point out their flawed logic, their self-centered motives. He had to remind them of their failings as members of a covenant community.

Worse than that, he had to point out the consequences. You keep doing that, he would say, sounding a lot like their mothers, then here’s what is going to happen. The rot at the center of their thinking would take them over, eating away at them until they were nothing but shells, empty and hurting and not understanding why. They would turn on one another, eating away at whatever dignity they thought they could cling to.

Who would want to listen to that? He was hated, to put it mildly. Tossed in prison, thrown in pits, ignored by most, jeered at by others. His name has become descriptive of a rant of negativity – a jeremiad is “a woeful, wrathful bad-news bearing message or messenger,” says one commentator.

But it makes perfect sense to get a hopeful, joy-filled message from Jeremiah, if you know where to look. In the “Little Book of Consolation”; chapters 30 through 33 in Jeremiah take on a completely different tone from the rest of the book. It is as if God knew that Jeremiah was wearing out and needed a respite, or the people were languishing

under the bad news and needed to hear something else, so these chapters were tucked in here as an oasis to keep us going in the dry and thirsty desert. Our reading for this week comes from that little book of consolation and sounds just the right note.

“I will give them gladness for sorrow.” Gladness isn’t just relief; it isn’t just a grim smile in a difficult moment. Gladness is about joy abounding. In the Bible, the word “gladness” is usually used to talk about weddings. And for the people of Israel, there was no better party than a wedding party. Gladness appears seven times in the book of Jeremiah, and four of them are about the end of gladness. It is taken away; it is ended; it is no more, because of the hard-headedness of the people. But three times (all of them in the little book of consolation) it is a promise and a hope.

The sweetest joy comes in the midst of sorrow. The deepest laughter comes bordered by tears. Or perhaps the most healing laughter, the most transforming joy comes in the midst of struggle and brokenness. It is about trusting with more than resignation and the burden of slogging our way through our own lives, but with the lightness of heart that allows there to be laughter in the cemetery. I will give them gladness for sorrow. It is a promise we can live with.

We’re unwrapping a new year. Part of what we realize is that being a Believer isn’t always easy. Whether it is the church home we grew up in or finding a faith community later in life, we must admit that there are as many tears as there are laughs. But at the heart of our faith can be that source of light and love and joy that is Jesus the Christ.

And who is this Jesus? What is this light from which we light our lives and our homes? He is the awaited one, the God with us one, the incarnated one, the one we have been singing about all season long. But how do we sum up this one?

“And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sit at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.”

This Jesus, according to John, is nothing less than life itself. Life in all its fulness. Life in all its depth and meaning. Life as we long to live it. We can’t be who we are, or who we long to be without him. He is, he told us, the light of the world. But in this moment, what we need to acknowledge is that he is the light of home, our home, where we live and breathe and have our being. He is our light. What a blessed time in our life as we celebrate endings—for they precede new beginnings. Amen.