

Philippians 3.12-14
On Your Mark!
WRCOB 1.10.21

In short, here's my New Year's prayer:

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Dear Lord

So far this year I've done pretty good.

I haven't gossiped

I haven't lost my temper

I haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty

Selfish, or overindulgent.

For this I am thankful.

But it's the morning of January 1st

And in a few minutes, Lord

I'm going to get out of bed

And from then on

I'm going to need a lot of help.

Amen.

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We stand at the beginning of 2021, the New Year.

To some it is a major milestone.

To others, just another day.

But it's appropriate to take some time

And review the past year.

And to share our hopes and dreams

For the upcoming year.

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Each of us has our own "2020 year in review."

I look back on my own year
With varying degrees of satisfaction and regret.

I've done a few things this year
That I'm humbly proud of . . .
If one can say that.

And I've done a few things this year
That I'm none too proud of.

But that's life.

And I am not alone in this.

All of us struggle with something.

Many have had their share of health issues this past year
If not our own, then somebody else's.

All have fought hard to get well or stay well.

And some have transitioned on..

2020 has had its share of loss.

Memories evoked by holidays and birthdays
Will fill us with sadness.

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The world in 2020 has seen its share
Of tragedy, trauma, and terror
Both manmade and natural.

Obviously, the pandemic
With its almost 2 million worldwide deaths
Takes the prize for the worst of 2020.

Along with it being a deadly plague
The pandemic has exposed
The ugly truths of racial injustice
Afflicting the health of our great nation

The year 2020, has also reinforced
The deep divide in our nation.

I find the events of last week in DC deeply disturbing

And the possibility of unifying our nation
Just seems to get further and further away.

In so many parts of the world
Violence continues unabated.

Innocent people caught up
In senseless acts of human hostility.

There's tragedy and trauma
Both natural and of human origin
With floods and fires and hurricanes
And war and famine and poverty.

It's troubling, that's for sure!

Along with all this, from a pastor's perspective
2020 also brought challenges to the church.

According to the Barna Research Group
Since the pandemic, 1 in 3 practicing Christians
Have dropped out of active participation.

Also, again from Barna
Practicing white Christians
Have become less motivated
Rather than more motivated
In addressing racial inequity.

I am just as surprised as you are with this statistic.

I would have thought just the opposite.

I applaud the work of the churches, both white and black
Who seek, through awareness, relationship
And commitment-building activities
To end systemic racism
Including our own congregation's work.

Also from Barna, in 2020, practicing Christians
Held a much smaller segment of our population.

In 2000, the population included 45% of people
Who were categorized as practicing Christians.

In 2020, that shrunk to 25% of the total population.

This impacts our congregation
Our district and our denomination.

And lastly, Barna found that millennials
Are more lonely and anxious in 2020
Than in previous years.

Millennials long for some kind of meaningful connection.

Again, from a pastoral perspective
This is a heavenly call for the church
To find authentic ways to reach them
Bringing hope and a sense of belonging.

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And yet, despite the gloom and doom
There were moments in 2020
That brought joy, hope, and wonder.

New life
In the form of children and grandchildren

Milestones of high school and college graduations
Job performances and promotions
And well-deserved retirements
Earn “well done and congratulations”.

2020 was filled with the joy of new life
New relationships, and new opportunities!

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With all that, it's easy to move forward in 2021
Following joys and successes of a previous year.

It is harder to move on
Past the more difficult stuff.

But move on we must.
And move on we must with hope and optimism.

The Holy Scriptures help in this.

For one of the great attributes of the Christian faith
Is undying optimism.

It doesn't matter how bad it is
From a Christian perspective
A new day is always dawning!

Pessimism and negativism
Do not belong in the Christian faith.

Because our faith affirms for us two things
God's sovereignty and God's love.

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The Apostle Paul writes a letter to a church.

It is filled with encouragement.

Though, Paul is under house arrest
And faces the possibility of execution for his faith

He remains positive because of his relationship with Christ.

How does he do it? He says . . .

Philippians 3:13-14 (ESV)

¹³ . . . one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Here, then, are three essentials for optimistic living.

1. Forget what is behind
2. Strive toward what is ahead
3. And persevere towards an ultimate goal.

Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote

“The great thing in this world is not so much where we stand as in what direction we are moving.

To reach the port of heaven we must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it. But we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor.”

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Scripture tells us it’s time to move on.

We must not let yesterday take away our today.

We will never experience a new chapter in our life
When we’re consumed with rereading the old ones!

We must not dwell on the past for life is linear.

It has a beginning. It has an end.

“You can’t go back and change the beginning but you can start where you are and change the ending.”

In looking through my grandfather's sermon notes
I ran across an illustration that Gramps used
On a sermon he preached from this text in 1950.

Grandpa said that when he was a boy
His father used to plow with a mule.

And when it came time to plow
His dad would mark the field in half
With a bright red flag.

Then, beginning on one end, he would start plowing
Sighting the flag squarely between the mule's ears.

With unwavering concentration
Neither looking back behind him or side to side

My Great Grandpa Eustace Hernando Whitten
Would plow towards that mark with singular focus.

It reminds me of what Jesus said.

Luke 9:62 NRSV Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

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So what is this mark that Paul presses on towards?

Of course, the larger question is
What is the mark or goal
That we should be pressing on towards?

The goal? To be like Jesus.

It is simple in its singularity.
And profound in its consequences.

That's the heavenly call upon our lives.

The late Rev. Fred Craddock says it like this.

This unusual man, Paul, had the idea that the ideal Christian life would be to be like Jesus: to love, to care, to give, to serve, to suffer, and to sacrifice like he did.

Paul's goal is be perfect like Jesus in every way.

An incredibly lofty goal for sure but what Jesus seeks.

Paul knows this.

Philippians 3:12 CEV I have not yet reached my goal, and I am not perfect. But Christ has taken hold of me.

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Let this be our New Year resolution.

Let it be the mark between the mule's ears!

Let us plow on in unwavering determination
Forgetting what is behind
Striving for what is ahead

Pressing on towards the goal
Of being recreated more and more
Into the image of Christ.

This endeavor brings deep joy and satisfaction
When we leave the past behind
And focus our energies on what lies ahead.

Knowing Jesus walks with us in all we say and do.

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From F. B. Meyer

*It is a mistake to be always turning back to recover the past.
The law for Christian living is not backward, but forward. Not*

for experiences that lie behind but for doing the will of God which is always ahead and beckoning us to follow.

Leave the things that are behind and reach forward to those that are before. For on each new height to which we attain there are appropriate joys that befit the new experience.

Don't fret because life's joys are fled. There are more in front. Look up, press forward, the best is yet to be.

Like Paul, let us face our circumstances
With undying optimism.

A new day is always dawning.

Remember, *"You can't go back and change the beginning but you can start where you are and change the ending."*

From Rev. Craddock

Oh no. But I'll tell you this: being like Jesus is the one thing on my mind. I'm running toward this, temples pounding, heart pumping, bones breaking, muscles aching, face sweating, running. If I could be like Jesus."

On your mark!
Get ready!
Go!