



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"Looking Back, Looking Ahead"

Proverbs 3:5-6

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Sunday, January 1, 2012 – New Year's Day

We don't have any wooden shoes at our house. We have lots of hats from Southeast Asia. As you can only imagine we are in the midst of packing. In fact, it is kind of chaotic at home because we have renters moving into our house on January 13. So in the midst of company being here and celebrating my son's 21st birthday we are feverishly packing. Those of you who have packed before, that means lots of decision making about what is going to Goodwill, what is going into storage for perhaps 20 years, what do we need in the next few months and what do we want to take with us - all those decisions. Those decisions mean we have to take inventory about what we want to leave behind and what we want to take with us into 2012.

Well, a new year rather does that for us as well. A new year invites us to take inventory and think about what we want to leave behind and what we want to take with us as we move into 2012. So let's begin by asking God to guide us even in that. Let us pray.

Loving God we are so thankful for the gift of this day, for the gift of this year and for the privilege of joining together as a community of faith to worship you and to celebrate your presence in our midst. Lord, we invite your Holy Spirit to come and be our teacher this morning, that even as we reflect on your Word, even as I bring this mediation, that you would help us to grow in the grace and knowledge of the living God, that you would change us from inside out. That as we launch into January as we begin 2012 our feet would be set upon your path, our will confirmed to your will. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well I remember a year ago, as we were moving into 2011, that Paul and I were anticipating celebrating our 30th wedding anniversary. Even though we were going to celebrate in September, I said to Paul, "You know I want to celebrate every month." And that is what we did. We did something special every month - January, February and March. Then came April. Surprise! Surprise back surgery for me. Then came May. Surprise car accident [their son]. Then came July. A surprise surgery [for Paul] and a postponed sabbatical [for Carol]. By the time it came to our anniversary in September, we were just so thankful to still be married (audience laughter) and for the gift of each day.

Well, as we launch into 2012, a year full of possibilities and yes, full of surprises as well. None of us here knows what the New Year will bring. But as I thought about Paul and I launching into our new chapter and returning to the mission field, that familiar text, Proverbs 3:5-6 came to mind and so given the opportunity to preach this morning and to choose my text, I have chosen that text for us. I memorized it 30 years ago as a new believer and it goes like this:

⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
⁶ in all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make your paths straight.

This is a text I learned so long ago and one that I was more than ready for, having spent at least ten years of my life trying to do it my way on this self-directed program and having taken not one but many dead ends. I was altogether ready for a new path despite the fact that my faith was as small as the smallest mustard seed. Despite the fact that my faith was in fact miniscule, I was terribly earnest and eager to follow Jesus. I must confess that I believe that this verse, Proverbs 3:5-6 offered me a very important principle, in fact a key principle – even a promise about living the Christian life. I thought that if I trusted God, depending on His wisdom rather than my own, that life would be smooth sailing.

Now, admittedly as I read the New Testament and learned about Jesus and Paul and the disciples, it didn't look completely problem free or painless, but nevertheless I was hopeful. My bubble burst not too long after my conversion. Five years later as a new missionary in Thailand, still in the throes of learning Thai language our second daughter was born. Even though we had prayed for a healthy baby and a problem free delivery, Danielle weighed only four pounds at birth and had to be resuscitated. Doctors at the small missionary hospital where she was born in central Thailand didn't know what was wrong with her and so four weeks later when she was strong enough we transferred her to a university hospital in Bangkok and there we learned that she had Edwards syndrome – a very rare chromosomal abnormality. Danielle caught pneumonia not long after, she died at seven weeks of age, and she is buried in Bangkok. Not quite the straight path I had envisioned as a new believer.

Well fast forward to 2005. This same proverb came to mind as Paul and I and our 14-year-old son, Joshua, packed up everything we had to move from Minnesota to Austin. We had no history in Texas, but felt the call of God to step out in faith and accept the call to be your associate pastor here at WHPC. I think it was in the first two weeks here that I learned that Steve Wilbraham had accepted a call to serve a church in Idaho. I didn't know Steve, but it didn't take long to realize that he played an important role here at WHPC and things might be a little bit different after he left. Well 1 year later Clint Regen left for Pascagoula, leaving me as the sole associate and five months later Doug Fletcher [Senior Pastor] resigned. Again, I turned to Proverbs 3:5-6

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Not quite the path I had envisioned coming to Austin.

Over the years, as I've continued to reflect on these two verses, I've come to realize that I need to unlearn the idea that the Bible is a book of principles, a type of manual, that will allow me to predict or even control how life will turn out. In fact it is not a collection of promises that we can cash in like coupons. Trusting God is just that. Trusting Him in the midst of whatever circumstances we might face. Trusting Him with what we hold to be most precious - trusting Him with our spouses, with our children, with our parents, with our health, with our money and with our stuff. Even with our ideas. Even with our very lives.

I think of Jim and Edith Johnson and the ways that they modeled for us that kind of trust as Jim battled and eventually succumbed to a rare form of cancer. I think of Colt McCoy, who despite the injury that pulled him out of his last game at UT, said in the interview immediately following that game that he had chosen to live his life believing that God is in control, that he chooses to stand on the rock.

As we begin a new year, as we begin 2012, I wonder are you willing to trust God with what you hold to be most precious? Or, are you worrying? Are you worrying about the job, the kids, the economy and/or the future? Even though you know, even though I know, that worry is pointless and worry can be harmful. The truth is there is so much out of our control, so little that we actually do control. I wonder what it would be like to enter the New Year trusting the Lord, not just with a piece of our heart, but with all of it. Not under the illusion that the New Year will be painless and problem free, but confident that even as God's grace has proved sufficient in the past, it will be sufficient in the future. Realizing that the challenges and hardships we might face can become the very means by which we grow closer to God and more like Jesus.

Today, when I find myself rather mindless saying Happy New Year to people, I begin to wonder what would a happy new year actually look like? What am I hoping for? What am I seeking in 2012? How does my brand of happiness line up with my identity as a follower of Jesus Christ? Instead of seeking a happy new year, what if my goal for 2012 was that it be a year that caused me to seek a deeper communion and union with the living God or one that enabled me to love my neighbor more?

Such a perspective is definitely at odds with the cultural values that have so profoundly shaped us as Americans living in the 21st century. But it was counter cultural back in 1st century Palestine or even 900 years earlier when Solomon wrote the Proverbs. Trusting the Lord is set into stark contrast to leaning on our own understanding, because more often than not God's ways are not our ways. Or, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, God does not arrange matters to suit our opinions or views or follow the path that we as humans would like to prescribe. God's path is free, originally and far beyond our ability to understand or to prove. He continues, "When God chose Mary as the instrument and entered the world in the manger in Bethlehem it was not an idyllic family occasion, but rather the complete reversal, a new ordering of all things on earth. The truth is we cannot lean on our own understanding to figure things out. These verses remind us that we are in need of spiritual transformation. We need to develop a whole new way of understanding.

As I begin a new year, I find myself wanting to worry less and trust God more. Not only because worrying is so pointless. Not only because there is so much over which I have no control, but also because my understanding about what is best is so limited. I find myself identifying with the words of author Gerald May who wrote, "I'm no longer very good at telling the difference between good things and bad things. Some things start out looking great, but wind up terribly. While other things seem bad in the beginning, but turn out to be a blessing in disguise." Gerald (Jerry) Sittser in his book, *A Grace Disguise*, the man who lost his mother, wife and daughter in a tragic accident, wrote three years later, "Never have I felt as much pain as I have in the last three years. Never have I experienced as much pleasure in simply being alive and living an ordinary life. Never have I felt so broken, yet never have I felt so whole. Never have I been so aware of my weakness and vulnerability, yet never have I been so content and felt so strong. My soul has been stretched."

As a new believer, I was cocky and ironically self-assured. I find that over the years that I am increasingly aware of how much I don't know and I'm challenged to trust God more – choosing not to lean on my own understanding of how things should be, not trusting the God of my imagination or even the God of my well developed theology, but instead choosing to trust the God who is so much bigger than any box I might create.

I find these familiar verses invite me to walk more humbly and to reckon with the fact that I just might be wrong about a thing or two. These verses invite me to hold my judgments and to listen more carefully. I'm reminded that listening is one of the most powerful gifts we can give to one another. By listening we communicate that we care. We also so by our actions that the other person has value – that he or she is worth listening to. Finally, by listening, truly listening, we exhibit the spirit of humility and consider others as more important than ourselves – owning up to the truth that there might be a thing or two that we can learn. I want to listen more in 2012.

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In all your ways, acknowledge God...I think there is one simple way we can acknowledge God more consistently and that is through the practice of giving thanks. Even as we gather this morning and welcome a new year, we can be thankful for the gift of life, for the privilege of community and for the joy of worship. For the opportunity to gather as a community of faith knowing that God is present in the midst of His people. We are not alone. We are not without hope. We can be thankful too for friends and for family – for food and for shelter and for the wonders of this amazing planet and these incredibly beautiful days we've enjoyed this past week. Instead of simply giving thanks to God before each meal, we can take the time to notice God's good gifts throughout the day.

My mother has been here since November 19, probably the longest spell we have ever spent together in 30 years and I have been so impressed with her positive attitude, her thankfulness, and her graciousness. At 91, I can only imagine that it would be easy to complain about aches and pains, about the state of the world and about her daughter moving back to Asia. Instead, she has consistently demonstrated a thankful spirit, a wonderful example to me.

I'm thankful for all you. In just two weeks, I will conclude my service at WHPC. What a privilege it has been for me to minister as an associate pastor here and I am so thankful for the ways in which you have allowed me to share your journey. This is an extraordinary congregation and I have been challenged, inspired and I've been humbled by the dedication and commitment that you have demonstrated to me. This time in Austin has been an incredible blessing for my husband and for me. Yet, in obedience to the living God we say goodbye and we head back to Asia.

Yesterday on Facebook, one of my Facebook friends, a student at UT, referenced Arthur Markman, apparently a professor of psychology and marketing here in Austin. Based on his research, Markman argues that rather than making negative New Year's resolutions, we need to make positive ones. In other words, rather than resolving to stop smoking it is more effective to resolve to start exercising, because if you really start and exercising program, your smoking will get in the way and you will have a reason to stop. Rather than resolving to eat less, resolve to eat healthy and you will have a reason to eat differently. Markman says, "If you focus on positive resolutions, you will not suffer the paradox of negative emotions."

So, in light of that advice, the resolutions I would like us to consider for the first day of 2012 include:

- 1) To choose to trust God with whatever it is that occupies your thoughts as an object of concern.
Instead of worrying make a declaration saying – I choose to trust you God with _____ and you fill in

the blank, whatever it might be. Whenever you find yourself worrying, make that declaration not once but again and again.

- 2) Cultivate humility by the practice of listening. Instead of jumping into offer your priceless pearls of wisdom, show people that you value and respect them by asking what they think and then actually listen to what they have to say.
- 3) Finally, practice thanksgiving by counting your blessings. In the morning before you get out of bed, in the evening as you dose off and throughout each day, each moment – take time to savor God’s good gifts.

These are three practices that I want to develop in 2012 and while I’m no longer convinced that Proverbs 3:5-6 assures me of a probably or pain free year, I am confident that just as God’s grace has been sufficient in the past it will be sufficient in the future. Not only that, as I exercise faith, humility and thanksgiving each day, I believe that God can enable me to follow in Jesus’ footsteps , so that as I’m changed from inside out, the path will indeed become more level and I will increasingly reflect God’s light, life and love to others.

But, as I stand before you this morning, I’m acutely aware that my husband, my mother, my sister and my brother-in-law are all hear listening – how embarrassing. They know I have a lot to learn - a lot to learn about choosing to trust God rather than worrying. About practicing humility, by listening. About giving thanks rather than complaining. A lot to learn. And even has I’ve held these verses in my heart over these many years, even as I’ve sought to be faithful as your pastor, even as I’ve prepared to return to the mission field, I’m still a novice, I’m still learning.

As we move into 2012 my desire is to keep learning. Learning to trust God with all my heart. Learning not to lean on my own understanding. Learning to acknowledge him in all my ways. Confident that by doing so He will indeed direct me and enable me to become all that God has created me to be.

What is your vision for 2012? Will you join me on that journey? Let us pray.

Loving God, we come desirous of becoming the men and women you have created us to be, that is why we are here. That is why we acknowledge you as our Lord and Savior. Lord, you are intimately acquainted with each person. You know their stories. You know their concerns. You know their struggles. Lord, I pray for all of us as we move into this new year that we would choose to let go of that worry, that arrogance, that conviction that we know it all – that we would let that go and instead cultivate the virtue of thanksgiving, of humility and of trust. Lord, I pray that we would become more keenly aware of your presence, your power and your passions Lord – that you would continue to infuse this congregation with your Spirit that we might make an impact on this community and the world. We pray these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.