

OUR NEW YEAR'S HOPE

Happy New Year to you all. 2017 is now about ten hours old. Doesn't seem possible, does it? Time goes by so quickly.

I wonder what this upcoming year holds in store for each of us. For our church. For our nation. For our world. None of us knows. Only God does. All we can do is hope and pray that 2017 will be a good year, or, God willing, maybe even a great year. Wouldn't that be wonderful? To have a year filled with health, happiness and peace.

But if nothing else, we can pray for a new year where, if we don't win the lottery, we at least won't lose our shirts. And if we don't enjoy perfect health, we hopefully won't come down with a terminal illness. And if our Commander-in-Chief and military leaders can't prevent our country from going to war, they will at least be as sure as possible that their decision is justifiable, will do everything they can to accomplish the mission while trying not to kill innocent civilians or blow the world up in the process, and then bring our servicemen and women back home as quickly and safely as they can.

Yes, I wonder what 2017 holds in store for us. We don't know. Only God does. That's the thing about brand new years. They're a blank page. A clean slate. The future is out there ahead of us, unknown and ready to unfold. That can be a good thing. It can also be a bad thing. That depends on a lot of things.

It depends on us, and some of the choices we make. Poor choices can lead to negative consequences, which in turn may lead to having a bad year.

What the new year holds in store for us also depends, at least in part, on the powers-that-be whose policies and political decisions effect all of us in positive or negative ways.

What the New Year brings could hinge on unforeseen circumstances such as the weather, or sudden, severe shifts in the earth's geographical fault lines that cause earthquakes.

And finally, whether 2017 is a good or bad year for you and me may be determined by just plain old luck, good or bad.

I'm not talking about God's will, but those random events no one could have predicted, where you're either at the right place at the right time or the wrong place at the wrong time when they happen.

We all hope for the best in 2017, but we know that we're walking into

an uncertain, uncharted future, with no guarantees that a wonderful year is in store for us. The only thing we know for sure about the upcoming year is that things are going to happen, be they good or bad, happy or sad, whether we like it or not and whether we're ready or not. And we will find out soon enough what those things will be.

Some of you may think I'm being pessimistic, and that this sermon is a bit of a downer. Please know that I really don't intend it to be. What I'm really trying to be is realistic about life. You know, like the author of Ecclesiastes was realistic about life.

In this human existence, the author says, there is a season for everything, and a time for every purpose under heaven. It seems that God planned it that way. And that leaves the coming New Year wide open to different possibilities.

I think I can safely say that in 2017, some people will be born, and some will die. Some people will kill, and some will heal. Some people will weep, and some will laugh. Some people will mourn, and some will dance. Some people will love, and some will hate. Some people will know war, and some will know peace. All of those things will happen to some people in 2017. We just don't know right now who those people are, when those things are going to happen to them, and whether you are I are included among those people.

Up to this point I've talked a lot about the unknown prospects of the New Year. Which begs the question, can we know anything about 2017, and the future we're heading toward?

Well, yes, in general terms I think we can. And one of the things we can know is that, no matter what season it is, whether good or bad or happy or sad, God is always in charge and has a plan, an ultimate objective in mind; and everything that happens to us and to the world bends toward God's ultimate plan and objective, even if we can't see it or don't understand how that could be.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," God said in this morning's reading from the book of Revelation; "the beginning and the end." I hear those words as God's way of saying to us, "No matter what time or season you're in, it's going to be okay, so try not to fear, because time itself belongs to me. I created time, and I'm in charge of it. And nothing will ever happen at any time or in any season that I'm not in control of."

Thank you, God. That's very helpful and reassuring to know as we head into 2017.

Another helpful and reassuring thing to know is that, no matter what awful events might happen in the world or to us in the future, no matter how bad things get, God can heal it. "Look! I am making everything new," God says. "A new heaven and a new earth." And a new us, if necessary. Because nothing is

impossible for God.

One quick caveat about what I just said. We should keep in mind that those reassuring words about God being able to make everything new aren't an invitation from God to be reckless or apathetic about the way we treat this planet we inhabit or treat ourselves and others because, hey, whatever damage we happen to inflict, God's going to fix it.

We certainly don't want to consciously or callously hurt our own or someone else's bodies and minds, or destroy the earth God made us stewards of, for goodness sake. So we need to do everything we can to keep ourselves healthy and take care of and preserve the world so that future generations can live on it and enjoy

But on the other hand, should we unintentionally or ignorantly damage our lives or God's creation, we can be hopeful because God is in the renewal business. I mean big time. And even better, God's purpose isn't merely to renovate and repair us and this broken earth, to put a Band-Aid over the wound, but to completely transform it!

The book of Revelation gives us a wonderful vision of what the transformed world and we are going to look like. "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

I'll be honest with you. I highly doubt that the transformed world as described in the book of Revelation is going to come about in 2017—although, who knows for sure? Only God does, and God may decide to surprise us. But chances are pretty darn good that, in the coming New Year, the world is going to stay pretty much the same as it has always been, and life will be a very familiar mixture of births and deaths, joy and pain, weeping and laughing, and war and peace. Because for everything there is a season, remember?

Exactly what good and bad stuff will happen, when it will happen and who it will happen to, we don't know right now. And how you and I, our families, friends and this church are going to be personally effected by the things that happen in 2017 is, at this moment, a mystery. The only things we do know for sure are that, one, there will be different times and seasons we're going to go through, some of them good and some not so good. Some of those times and seasons will affect us directly, while some will barely affect us at all. We know this because our wisdom and experience tells us this is the way life is. Human existence a mixture of highs and lows, joys and sorrows, pleasure and pain.

The other thing we know is that our God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Which assures us that, whatever happens to us in the

coming year and whenever it happens, God will be there with us.

Even if we come through 2017 bruised and hurting and feeling like it's the end of the world, we can have faith that, with God's love in Jesus Christ surrounding us and the Holy Spirit to guide and enable us, we will make it through and our world won't end.

So, sisters and brothers, let's pray for a great New Year, a season blessed by God with peace, prosperity and justice for all. May 2017 bring much joy and happiness to one and all. But if this New Year turns out at times to be a dry and desolate season, and we find ourselves plodding through the wilderness, weak, hurting, dehydrated and searching desperately for a drink, let us hold on to each other, help each other, pray fervently for relief, and continually remind ourselves of God's promise that to those who are thirsty he will give water without cost from the spring of life. Because therein lies our hope for this New Year, and all for the new years to come. Thanks be to God. Amen.