

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

New Year's Day - January 1, 2023

God's Mercy Remembered

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: January 19, 2023

Isaiah 63:7-9

I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD,
the praiseworthy acts of the LORD,
because of all that the LORD has done for us,
and the great favour to the house of Israel,
that he has shown them according to his mercy,
according to the abundance of his steadfast love.
For he said, "Surely they are my people,
children who will not deal falsely";
and he became their saviour in all their distress.
It was no messenger or angel
but his presence that saved them;
in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Happy New Year to all!

How exceptional it is for us to be able to worship together on New Year's Day. We have our customs for welcoming the New Year; many will eat pork, sauerkraut and potatoes or some variety. Maybe you have a New Year's pretzel waiting at your house. Before we get too far into football and financial predictions, we do well, as God's children, to take time to stop and reflect on what has happened before in our lives to bring us to this point. How has God blessed us and prepared us for what lies ahead?

My cell phone makes this exercise easy by providing A Year in Review. Significant pictures from the past year appear with

music to accompany the snapshots. These images show fun times we had in the waves at the beach, hiking adventures in Oregon, birthday celebrations, times with my family and pictures of my church family. A picture of Ed Lyness reminds me of all the good people who have passed to the church triumphant and are no longer with us on this side of heaven. Life is not a straight line; life moves more like a zig zag with joys and heartaches. Where have you traveled in your life during these past 12 months? What is there to celebrate? What is there to lament? Who have been your companions on this journey? What have been the regrets, the surprises, the delights, the moments of judgment, the seasons of grace?

The end of an old year and the start of a new one invites us to reorient ourselves for whatever road lies ahead. As God's people we are called to remember, reflect, and recognize God's movement in our life. Sometimes we praise God offering thanks with joy. Other times, as we consider our lives, we come to God with prayers of longing and sadness. We carry on for strength for the days to come. Before we move forward, we do well to look at the past.

My hunch is the **holy family** had probably seen enough of Christmas at this point. A few days after Christmas, Mary and

Joseph must have been ready for things to return to normal-- whatever that is. They must have been ready to return home with their baby Jesus to their home in Nazareth, to show everyone the baby and to set up housekeeping. But they would never see normal again. This baby, Jesus had brought with him a new normal. Even the Holy Family was not given the luxury of *sleeping in heavenly peace* for very long. Joseph had another dream with an angel who warned of an evil tyrant who would harm the child. Could they trust another dream?

As children of faith, they knew the teachings from the past, which brings us to Isaiah. In the time of Isaiah, the Hebrew people had experienced a traumatic exile. While living in Jerusalem they were overtaken by the Assyrians. Most of the people were taken to live in Babylonia where they were separated from their families, their homes and even their God. God was understood to dwell in the temple in Jerusalem. Now that was hundreds of miles away. After 70 years the people miraculously returned home. The image of God's steadfast love, grace, and mercy is indeed deeply moving and vital. The people wanted to say, God is good all the time, but they continued to harbor doubts. The people couldn't respond, "All the time." For the people's sake, the prophet proclaimed the

good works of God, even in the darkest of time. *"It was not a representative of God, his messenger, or an angel that God sent to do his saving work, but God's holy presence self who in God's love and pity redeemed them."* Now they embraced a vision empowering them to live faithfully in the times ahead. Mary and Joseph drew on their faith enabling them to flee in the opposite direction to Egypt. On the one hand, there's *the little Lord Jesus no crying he makes...*but on the other hand, families wept for their children. If joy has felt illusive for you this holiday season, you are in good company with Mary and Joseph and Jesus ... and God.

At the dawn of this New Year, many of us may be looking at the world around us and long for a delivered God. Isaiah 63:7-9 speaks to us as well. God dwells with us to put our feet upon solid ground; God calms the waters of the storm; God brings peace and quiet from the enemies; and God restores health, and relationships. Hear this telling lesson from children ...

One afternoon, Thomas, age five, and Stephen, age three, were proudly showing their father the new seesaw constructed in the backyard. "Let's try it out," invited father. Thomas and Stephen sat on one end: Father on the other. The boys' combined weight of 79 pounds was no match for father's

heavy 185 pounds. His end crashed to the ground while the boys rocketed skyward with pupils dilated and tiny arms clinging desperately to the sides of the board. "Pa-Pa, you have to move to the center so we don't fall off!" exclaimed Thomas. "Yeah, move to the center so we can play," pleaded Stephen. Pa-Pa did. They played. Nobody fell off.

Move to the center so we can play ... what a concept for restoring frustrated relationships and exhausted spirits! Bring the Lord to the center of our lives. Friends, the center, the very core of our existence is our relationship with God, our father. We discover what God is like from the mighty acts of God in the past, in our present, and for our future. Hear again the words of Isaiah: *I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us.* What are our hopes and prayers for the New Year, not just for ourselves but for the world? What will the new year bring for refugees, those devastated by wars, hurricanes, and earthquakes. Weekly we continue to urgently pray, Thy kingdom come.

God writes straight with crooked lines. God uses zigs and zags to prepare an open road for his people. Spend time with God, for now is the season for each of us to pay attention to what

we've lived, the map we've traveled. The zigs and zags will point to Jesus, the One who still goes before and joins us along life's path.



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