

Sermon – Matthew 25:31-46; Revelation 21:1-6a
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Grace Lutheran Church
New Year's Eve – Year B
31 December 2020

“New Year, New Creation”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Well, we've almost made it. 2020, this year that most of us would like to forget, is almost over. Last year on this night, who would have imagined a worldwide pandemic of such scope that it would put its germy little fingerprints all over every aspect of our lives? We have lived lives masked, hidden away from one another in so many ways. This has been the correct response, but it hasn't been a lot of fun. For those of us who have escaped both the ravages of the disease and the financial toll it has extracted, the year has been challenging. For those who have been affected and afflicted, it has been ruinous. In the midst of the pandemic, we have struggled as a nation ever more sharply divided about nearly everything. Worship and work, education and entertainment, living and loving – every aspect of our life has been changed this year. I don't imagine many of us will be disappointed to toss out this year's calendar and hang a fresh one on kitchen wall.
2. On the other hand, in spite of our resolutions and best intentions, we know full well that the movement from 2020 to 2021 is not going to make everything better or put our troubles to flight. For one thing, even the progress we do manage to make is slow, halting. In the best-case scenario, an end to this pandemic is months away. The progress we hope to continue to make in matters of racial justice is hard work; deep wounds heal slowly. Any path back to a sense of unity in our nation is going to be a long path to walk. More than this, however, is the reminder from Matthew's Gospel tonight that

we are still goats, regardless of what the calendar says. The suffering in this world, whether in 2020 or any other year, is not simply something that happens to us. While there are many things that happen through no fault of our own, there are plenty more that are the result of human sin. Of the selfishness that keeps us from caring fully for the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and the naked, the sick and the imprisoned. Oh, it's not that we haven't shown any love and care to these and to others. But the end of a year is as good a time as any for being honest with ourselves, and Jesus' parable demands this honesty from us. We have failed our neighbors and fallen short of God's glory. We are, on our own, goats.

3. But if the end of the year is a time that demands honesty, a new year invites hope. Not hope in ourselves, but hope gifted to us by the God who has come to make all things new. The Jesus who points out our goatish nature does not leave us in it. He is the Lamb whose blood suffices for his flock and we, in his death and resurrection, are reborn as sheep, promised good pasture forever. But God is not simply making us new; God is giving birth to a whole new creation, a new heaven and a new earth, through the child to whom Mary gave birth. The Christ child whom we welcome into our broken world this Christmas is the same ascended Lord who will welcome us into his home in eternity. We will not save or redeem this world through our efforts or exertions, but we do not need to. In Christ, God *has* saved, *does* save, *will* save us. From ourselves and all that would seek to harm us.
4. So it is that we find ourselves in the rather odd position of being brand new creatures in the same old creation. Citizens of the coming Kingdom sojourning in this world. What are we to do? Well, if we're sheep, let's live like it! I have no doubt that 2021 will still be a time of hunger and thirst, of alienation and illness. As sheep of God's own fold, we follow our Good Shepherd into the needs of our neighbors, discovering God already at work. For God, the psalmist reminds us, is mindful of mortals and cares for them,

for us, in all times and seasons. If you're the sort of person who likes to make resolutions, I'd invite you to simply affirm the gift and power of baptism in your life. You are a child of God, marked with Christ's cross, sealed with God's Spirit, sent to light your light so shine that all may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

5. Of course, we hope and pray that in many ways 2021 will be an improvement over the year that was. But who knows? We cannot control the times and seasons; we can only live in them faithfully. One of the best gifts I received this Christmas, because I'm a bit of a dork, is from Erika (who knows me well); it's a framed print of a snippet of dialogue between Frodo and the wizard Gandalf from Tolkien's epic fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo is understandably lamenting that disaster and ruin have come upon the world during his lifetime, and that he has a part to play in the events about to unfold: "I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo. "So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us." Through these fantastical characters, Tolkien, a devout Roman Catholic, gives voice to the Christian call to discipleship. The years follow on, one after another. The seasons come and go, with weeping and laughter, planting and plucking up, silence and speech, and yes, living and dying. As Christ-followers, what will we do during this time that is gifted to us?
6. Tonight, we are happy to see an old year out and a new one in. But our joy is found in the Creator who is mindful of us, in the Christ who dies to turn us from goats into sheep, in the new heaven and earth that will one day dawn by grace as God redeems the cosmos. You, in all times and seasons, belong to God. Nothing can change this simple reality of who you are. So, what will you decide to do with the time you have been freely given? I pray that you and I will live like the sheep Jesus died for us to become. To a new year, and a new

creation, and a new chance every day to live out our faith. Thanks be to God!
Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and
your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.