

In One Year and Out the Other December 30, 2007

In her book *A Year by the Sea*, author Joan Anderson tells of a New Year's Eve experience during the time she spent a year alone on Cape Cod. She described herself as a "nonathletic, overweight, middle-aged hypochondriac" who had decided to run the annual race in the little town where she had taken up residence. This was to be her first real attempt at changing her life for the better, and was part of her New Year's resolutions.

She said she felt ridiculous as she looked around at all the legitimate runners, and at one point stepped to the side, trying to figure out a way to disappear. However, she soon stepped back among the runners, and before she knew it, the starting gun sounded, and they were all off. It was cold, and she was out of shape, but she pressed on. Just when she thought she couldn't take another step, she saw the finish line. Renewed energy surged through her, and she threw her chin to the sky, pulled her shoulders back, and crossed it.

As she collapsed on a park bench and began to recover, she reflected on what had just happened. She realized it was a somewhat strange victory for her. She wrote, "**Today I had a choice: to grab the day or to be victimized by it. The gift was being given a chance to go beyond my perceived limits.**"

Then she heard a noise parade assembling behind her in the park. It was a gathering of locals carrying pots and pans, cymbals and sticks. And their sole purpose was to create enough noise to drive away that which was old, and to make room for the new. With all the activity, Anderson began to realize that she had crossed a significant threshold; she was leaving her past, and heading toward an unknown future. On previous New Year's Eves, she had been sad about leaving behind that which was known, and somewhat frightened by that which she couldn't know that lay ahead. But that was the past; this year was going to be different; she was sure of it.

You and I stand on the threshold of another new year, and I can guarantee you

of one thing—along with the fact that I'm not planning on running any races tomorrow, we can know that 2008 will be different for us! We can't know exactly what that "different" will look like, but much of what happens is up to us and our perspective on what our lives next year can be like.

Many of us might be prone to worry about the unknown, but the Bible passage we have for today encourages us to go a different way. This passage in the Gospel of Matthew puts it like this: "**Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.**"

The speaker is Jesus, and he is trying to remind us that worrying about what the future holds is a wasted activity. Instead, we need to remember that God has given us this gift of life, and if we understand that the giver of loving goodness is the source of life, then surely we can trust that Goodness for whatever we need to support life—whether that's strength, courage, healing, hope, peace—whatever is needed.

Given that assurance, I wanted to share a bit of what I hope for each of us in the year to come. I'm not poetic enough to come up with this on my own, but personally, I've found that the words of the Rascal Flatts song, *My Wish*, really go a long way toward expressing what I'd like to share with you this morning.

I don't necessarily agree with everything the song says. For instance, the first line is "I hope that the days come easy and the moments pass slow..." Those are nice sentiments, but in my mind, they're pretty unrealistic. Most of our days don't come easy, and to expect them to can leave us rather disappointed and disillusioned with life. In addition, sometimes learning and spiritual growth only come through the toughest of times. That's when we realize we aren't really in control of life, and that's when we understand that there's only one we can trust totally, and that's God.

However, there are other wishes expressed in the song that I really appreciate. One phrase that repeats the essence of our Bible passage is this one: "**Your dreams stay big, and your worries**

stay small.” How important it is that we keep on dreaming big dreams, and not allow our fears and concerns from holding us back in living out those dreams! As Belva Davis has said, **“Don’t be afraid of the space between your dreams and reality. If you can dream it, you can make it so.”**

A dream can really be a vision of what could be, and having those dreams gives us energy for moving in that direction. As the prophet Joel has said in my paraphrased version: **“Without vision, the people perish.”** I think that he’s saying that without our dreams, there really is no future. So, one of my wishes for each of us this coming year is that we will have dreams—big dreams of what could be, and the strength and courage we need to move toward making those dreams reality.

There are a couple other lines in this song that resonate with me. One of the things it says is, **“I hope you always forgive, and you never regret.”** And another one of the lines ties with that in saying, **“And you find God’s grace in every mistake.”**

One of the things I think many of us have trouble with is the mess we often make of things. We say the wrong thing; we do the wrong thing; we hurt those we profess to love the most; we lose track of where we’re going, and become shortsighted. And many times, when our lives seem to be filled with one mistake after another, we beat ourselves up unmercifully.

Maybe as we move into 2008, we can acknowledge that, yes, we will make our fair share of mistakes, and maybe even more than our fair share. That’s part of what it means to be human. But in the midst of those mistakes, hopefully, some learning will take place, and some of God’s goodness can break through. That loving goodness comes in the form of a lesson learned, or compassion deepened, or understanding enhanced. It comes in the form of better self-understanding, in a willingness to be vulnerable, in our attempts to change and, as the Bible passage says, to be steeped in God-reality.

And the way we move in that direction is through the power of forgiveness. ‘I hope you always forgive,’ the song says, and I say “ditto” to that.

Forgiveness is a hard thing for many of us. We tend to hold onto our hurt feelings and angry thoughts. Forgiveness seems to be an unnatural thing for us to consider.

But, the reality is that failing to forgive hurts us the most. We become bitter, cynical people, and drive others from us. We build walls instead of bridges, and become more and more separated from one another. Hanging onto our resentment can totally destroy us and can destroy our lives, so forgiveness is essential if we want to live the kind of life that is full and joyful.

Forgiveness goes 360 degrees. We have to be willing to forgive others when they wrong us, and begin to allow the hurt to subside, instead of allowing it to fester. We have to be willing to recognize when we have been harmful to others, and apologize and seek forgiveness. And we have to learn to be more forgiving of ourselves, and accept some of our human frailties, while at the same time resolving to make things right and to do better. Forgiveness is the most powerful gift of love imaginable, and it’s only possible to forgive because of God’s forgiveness of us. Let’s make every day a day when we practice forgiveness.

There’s yet another of the lines of *My Wish* that captures what I hope for each of us in the year ahead, and it’s this one: **“And you always give more than you take.”** And another goes right along with that one. It says, **“And you help somebody every chance you get.”**

We talked about this some in the course of Christmas Sundays, but giving is what we do best, and when we put our focus on others rather than ourselves, we can make this world a better place. There are so many different ways in which we can give of ourselves. We can give of our time; we can share some of our interests and the things we’re good at; we can share of our financial resources. We can share by handing out genuine smiles and hugs, by offering a word of encouragement, by being kind to all we meet. Mother Theresa had it right when she wrote, **“Kind words can be short and easy to speak but their echoes are truly endless.”** So my wish for all of us in 2008 is that we help others and give much more than we take.

There are many other good thoughts in the song by Rascal Flatts, but the one I like best has to do with realizing that we are loved. It's stated in a couple of different ways: "'ya' never forget all the ones who love you in the place you left," and when we're out there pursuing our dreams to "know somebody loves you, and wants the same things, too."

Being loved and loving, deeply and fully, unconditionally with no strings attached, can be hard for us humans. So many times our love is tinged with a selfish ring to it, but the love you and I have from God isn't like that. It's a love that never dies. No matter how far off the path we go, God's love is there. No matter how naughty we are, God's love surrounds us. No matter how lost we feel, God's love is with us. That's my greatest wish for everyone of us this New Year—that God's love be real in our hearts, in our homes, in our towns and cities, in our world, and that we know in every ounce of our being that we are loved. That's my wish.

Closing:

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Write it on your heart that every day is the best day in the year." It's not just New Year's Day that we celebrate, but the newness that the dawn of every day brings. I wish for you that every day is indeed the best day in the year.

Have a Happy New Year, and go in peace. Amen.