

Reflections for January Newsletter

January again—a new year on the calendar begins. It is always an interesting time of the year. There is an expectation or hope that things will be new. There is a hope that they will not fall into the same pattern of the last year or years. Some of that is a residual from the events surrounding the Christmas celebration—all those hymns of joy, those wishes shared expressing hope for peace on earth and good will toward men. The question that comes to my mind is **how** do we make things new? **How** do we fulfill those hopes for different outcomes? Do we focus and reflect on what has occurred this past year? Or do we focus and reflect on our hopes and expectations for the year just beginning? It seems that either focus by itself has a problem. If we only focus on the past year without committing to learning something about ourselves, our behaviors and our motivations by our reflections, what is the point? If we do not seek the causes for the event, whether good or bad, how can we hope to use those past experiences to make the coming time different? The events may be celebrated or mourned, but the events cannot be changed; only our perspective about them can be changed by this process of reflection. If we only focus on the future as is often the case with the “resolutions” we feel called to make on the occasion of the New Year, what is the point if we don’t consider the events of our past which direct and influence those resolutions? Studies about these “New Year Resolutions” indicate that they are generally directed toward self-improvement, but rarely kept beyond the month of January. Each calendar year ends with the church entering a new year the month before the rest of the world. The church’s first month is in December and is known as Advent. This is a four week time of both looking back (to the birth of the Christ child) and a time of anticipation (looking forward to the return of Christ). Advent is a time of both celebration (the Incarnation) and of preparation (the second coming). A key element of the celebration of the Incarnation is the call sung by angels about peace and good will among people. It seems that we want those things. We yearn for the Peaceable Kingdom of which Isaiah spoke ...peace and good will. And during this Advent time as we prepare to celebrate the Nativity of Jesus there are many “drives”. These efforts offer the opportunity to participate in creating “good will” by showing care for “others”. There seems to be more people during this time period who join in showing generosity as collections of toys and food are widely made and publicized. Efforts are made to provide “Christmas” dinners for the homeless abound. So much concentrated effort...for a month. Then Christmas is over and we hear few if any continuing stories of these efforts to bring comfort and joy to others. The media seeks out and tells us stories of good will...from Thanksgiving until Christmas...and then they seem to disappear from the headlines and news stories. Is our ability to show “good will towards others” so transient? I actually think that many efforts are made throughout the year, but for some reason these efforts are not worthy of headlines. There are food banks and shelters for the homeless which operate all year. Much of this work is done by folks who volunteer time and effort to helping others without publicity. But in a broader sense, perhaps we need to reflect on the transient nature of the offers made. How do we change events so that this type of caring is not needed so widely? To truly spread “good will” to all, don’t we need to work on transformation of the

structure which leaves folks in those situations where “drives” during the season celebrating the coming of Emmanuel are so desperately needed? The possibility of transformation in our lives seems to be an integral part of what we celebrate as we prepare to enter a new calendar year. When we read the words of John the Baptist in Luke, we find the call he made for people to repent wasn’t for them to just be sorry for their past actions. The first step was to acknowledge that what they had done was wrong. But that was just the first step. To each group gathered to hear his voice in the wilderness he said that what they needed to do was change their behavior toward others by changing the way they were living daily. John’s words to them are also found in the teachings of the child whose birth we celebrated a week ago. The instruction to share possessions was lifted up. The church has always seen that as part of the call of discipleship—to address hunger and need as it exists. But John and Jesus both called for a transformation in the way we treat each other. Transformation—changing—our ways of looking at each other so that we see through the eyes of the One who came to dwell among us and the changes do not end with February. Perhaps seeking that change and applying it to the way we interact with all those who are “other” is a good use of our January reflection and resolution time.

Shalom,

Pastor Libby