

A Year Like No Other
Texts: Philippians 1:12-20, James 1:2-12
Kirkpatrick Memorial Presbyterian Church – January 31, 2021
Rev. Michael F. Atzert

It is usually this Sunday that my sermon is a recap of the year that was. Some years, I have used a slideshow to highlight our ministry together, smiling faces engaged in fellowship and service to our God. If I did that this year for the year 2020, I am afraid that it would be a lot of pictures of an empty sanctuary. We were not together much last year. We did not have those kinds of “moments” – you know that ones I am talking about – where we were serving together, laughter was a key component, and all just seemed right with the world. Not that I am saying that I did not feel God’s presence throughout 2020, but it is just different when we can be in person.

2020 was, by far, one of the most challenging, difficult, frustrating and amazing years of our lives and of the life of our church. There were days...yes, there were days when I wondered “How long, O Lord?” I would hit a wall and have to go home – or Amy and I would take a walk in Clawson Park so that I could clear my head and decompress. And there were other times when I watched God’s plan unfold right before my eyes. An up and down kind of year. A year when I had no idea what I was doing so much more than I felt like I had a handle on what was going on. I am so thankful for all the hands and hearts who have helped and supported our ministry together this year – which is really ALL of you. You are all truly God’s blessing to me.

I want to look at all three Scriptures for this recap of a year like no other. We begin with the words from Psalm 67, which prepared us for our worship this morning. “May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you...May God bless us still, so that all the ends of the earth will fear him.” While there is a lot about the past year that I mourn and grieve, some of which I am still frustrated and angry about, there is much for which I praise God. There is much

to be thankful for as we have continued to do ministry despite isolation, quarantining and this 2020 phrase “social distancing.”

I am thankful for this thing called Zoom. I distinctly remember that on Monday, March 16, I began the ginormous task of figuring out how we would have worship on the following Sunday after news of the shutdown was delivered. There were considerations of using YouTube or Facebook Live because so many of the other churches were already using it. However, I did not like the fact that there was no way for the church to participate in these. It would be more like watching a movie in a movie theater. Then, I discovered Zoom – and was intrigued by what we might be able to do.

I praise God for the gift of Zoom. Although we have all experienced Zoom fatigue this year, it has kept us together. We can see one another on Sunday morning during the worship hour. We can shut our cameras off if we did not feel like getting ready before church. We can wave and smile and chat with one another. For me, it is brutal to preach to an almost empty sanctuary. Seeing you all as I am delivering the sermon is a huge help to me – thanks be to God! You have been patient and gracious to us as we have navigated through Zoom. We have made mistakes – we have worked hard to practice during the week of those early days and make the worship experience as good as it can be. And God has been with us through it all.

The best part, I believe, about Zoom is that it has changed how I look at church. We are no longer confined to the village of Ringoes for our worship – and certainly for our mission and service. We have been in the homes of those in many other states. We have reconnected with former members and family members. We have stayed connected to those who have moved away recently. We have been able to have church with those in assisted living facilities or who it

has been difficult to get out to church. I praise God for this. “May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you.”

“Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.” These words were written from the Apostle Paul to the church at Philippi. Paul had many difficulties throughout his life of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet he sees these difficulties as an avenue for advancing the Gospel. The pandemic year has been more than difficult. But we have advanced the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How have we done that?

First and foremost, I think it is safe to say that many, if not all, of us have held onto our faith in Jesus Christ more tightly during these times. Especially in those early days, when everything seemed so out of control, our faith in God was what sustained us and carried us through. How else have we advanced the Gospel? Another answer is on page 11 of the Annual report under the attendance statistics. Our overall Sunday attendance for worship is up 384 people from 2018 and 484 from 2019. That is between 7 and 9 more people attended worship each week in 2020 than they did in the past two years. Think about that. More importantly, think about what that momentum can do for us as we think ahead.

Besides the numbers, we have engaged in new ministries to advance the Gospel. Our weekly prayer meeting has consistently been between 6-12 people each week, gathering to share, to fellowship, and to pray. We have affirmed how important prayer is to our church life and our faith lives, and this has been such a blessing for all. We have expanded our food ministries to include the Blessing Box and in February, giving out food bags to need families in our community on Saturday morning, February 20th. There is a need, and the church is responding.

I want to point out that since our food ministry began with the Deacons in 2014, we have distributed 525 food baskets and bags to families in need at Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas.

As I said before, I think this pandemic has us looking at everything differently. How can we reach out – beyond state lines – with the love of Jesus Christ? How can we be the church in places where our Zoom worshipers are located? How do we get out into our own community more to identify needs that no one has identified? These are all questions I am going to bring to Session as we think about our vision for the future. For those joining us out of state, I hope that you can find a church home or return to your church in the coming months after it is safe. But if you cannot, Zoom is here to stay for worship and other fellowship events. An you are part of us now.

Finally, James writes, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance...Blessed is the one who perseveres under trail because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.” I have to admit that I struggle with considering the last year pure joy. Some joy perhaps, but I am not at the “pure joy” level yet. And I might not ever get there. I wish we did not have to close. I wish we could open next Sunday. But, I know that we cannot at this point. Our goal is to keep us all safe.

Where was the joy and blessing this year? It was within each of us. I saw it in the faith and fellowship of you all. When we gathered for worship. When we played Bingo – or named that Christmas carol – or painted virtually. There was blessing and joy when we thought outside the box about how to reach out, how to affirm our faith, how to care for one another.

Friends, there is joy and blessing in thinking what may be on tap for KMPC in 2021 and beyond. Can we grow the church – in faith and in numbers? Can we find a way to reach young families and fill our sanctuary with children? Can we do outreach and mission across state lines? How can we open our doors to groups in our community, while continuing to nurture our relationship with our AA groups and Boy Scout troop? Is there ministry to happen in the community with other partners? We have stood the test – we have shown our love for God and for one another. Let us be joy-filled and blessed – thanks be to God. Let us pray...

Faithful God, we give You thanks for the year that was. We thank You for Your presence and Your love that have been felt so clearly. We thank You for guidance and wisdom and direction as we have tried so many new things. We thank You for technology. And we thank You for the love of this church family. Hear our prayers in Jesus' name, Amen.