

Three Rules for a New Year

A Sermon on Romans 13:11-14 and Matthew 24:36-44 by the Rev. Philip Major
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It is the beginning of our new year. Today, on the first Sunday of Advent, we begin a new year of our journey with God. My new year's wish for us is to make it through to the end of this year being more confident and courageous in the love of God, knowing more of God's peace in our hearts, living in stronger relationships of trust with one another than we have today.

In our scripture readings for today we are given three ideas to guide us. The first is found in our passage from Matthew. The first idea is that the terrifying, tragic things we experience do not mean it is the end of the world. Jesus reminds us of the story of Noah and the flood. The story tells of a terrible time. *They knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.*

When I read this passage, I am reminded of what the nurses and doctors in New York City experienced five years ago during the Covid Pandemic. It was a terrifying, unexpected time. The people knew almost nothing, until the pandemic came and swept many of them away. In April of 2020, each day more than 300 people in New York City died from Covid. Especially for the doctors and nurses who worked in the hospitals, it must have felt like the world was ending. They faced a situation that was more terrible than any they had experienced, but the time of tragedy was not the end of the world.

The same thing is true for you and me. You and I will experience times of tragedy, things we hoped would never happen. Jesus reminds us of the importance of persevering through the difficult times.

Those of us wake up to discover that we are surviving the tragedies of life have a choice to make each day. Each day we have the opportunity to choose to lay aside the works of greed, fear, and anger and put on the armour of light. This is the second idea to guide us through our new year. It comes from Paul's letter to the Romans.

God has given us the ability to choose between right and wrong. Each day we have the opportunity to choose to do the right thing, regardless of what happened yesterday. The apostle Paul placed a great deal of confidence in our ability to choose right or wrong. This is one of the great gifts of Paul's letters. Paul reminds us we have the ability to choose our actions and our response to life, and that each individual will choose between right or wrong.

The weakness of Paul's letters is that he goes a bit overboard when it comes to dividing categories of things into right or wrong. For instance, Paul argued that faith is a set spiritual practices, not a set of physical practices. But then Paul goes a step further and argues that everything that is spiritual is good and everything that is related to our physical bodies is weak or even bad.

Today's passage ends with a verse on this theme: *make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires*. Paul's categorization of everything related to the flesh as bad, contradicts core ideas of Holy Scripture about the goodness of God's creation, including the physical creatures, the human beings, God has created.

Yet Paul's main point about us choosing our approach to life is one of the most important and helpful ideas for us on our journeys with God. Each day we have the ability to choose our approach to the many challenges we face. We can choose to make God's way of doing things our way of approaching the world.

In Paul's letter to the Romans he says, *Owe no one anything, except to love one another*. Love is our method. This is our third idea to guide us through our new year with God. *Owe no one anything, except to love one another*.

I am sometimes hesitant to even use the word 'love', because there have been times I have heard someone use this expression, 'I love you' and then they do something that hurts people. Their selfish, hurtful behavior shows they are either ignorant about what the word means, or they are just out and out lying. So if we are going to use the expression 'love one another' we should define what it means.

Much of our definition comes from, or is inspired by, Paul's other letters. *Owe no one anything, except to be patient with one another. Owe no one anything, except to be kind to one another.* This is the point when Paul's verse, just nine words, becomes tinged with a little streak of humor because it is a very big thing to be patient and kind.

Love is a quick, easy word that describes the longest, most important, most difficult task in life. *Owe no one anything, except to love one another. Owe no one anything, just don't be selfish or think of yourself as better than others. Owe no one anything, except your honesty. Owe no one anything, except to act in ways that are trustworthy.*

For some people, love might be a feeling. We sometimes think of love as a relationship between two people. For you and me, love is way of behaving. For us, as Jesus' disciples, love is a way of treating other people that builds trust. Love is a way of treating other people that builds relationships.

Paul has said this other ways, in other places in his letters, but this expression is the most helpful for me. This is the most helpful way to say it, because it gives us direction for building connections with one another while creating healthy boundaries and encouraging us to be healthy in our relationships. *Owe no one anything, except to love one another.* It is our job to provide support and stay connected, not to make the pain go away.

So we begin our new year, holding onto these ideas to guide us in our journey. It is our task to persevere. At some point, each one of us will come face to face with some sort of unexpected tragedy. The terrible, unexpected things we experience do not mean it is the end of the world. It is our task to choose the way we will respond to life. Each day we have the opportunity to choose to lay aside the works of greed, fear, and anger and put on the armour of light. It is our task to do the most difficult thing, which is to love the people God has given us. *Owe no one anything, except to love one another.*