

WGUMC January 5, 2013 New Year's Promise
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Ephesians 1:3-14

Living in the West, you always have one eye on the water gauge. I grew up along the Yellowstone River, the longest free-flowing river in the United States. "Free flowing" means that there are no dams, no reservoirs, no way to store water during wet years to get through the dry years. And on the high plains east of the Rockies there are plenty of dry years.

So, on my quick trip to Tahoe on Christmas Day, I was already conditioned to be anxious about the sorry state of the snow pack in the Sierras. I came home hoping and praying for the rains to come, and worrying about what will happen if they don't come.

Many of us have been through a long dry spell this past year, and I'm not just talking about the weather. When it comes to our jobs, our relationships, our wealth and our health, many of us are waiting for the drought to break, for the creeks

to run, for the hills to green, for the growing, healing season to begin.

When the forecast doesn't give us much hope of rain anytime soon, it's good to be reminded that our reservoirs are already full to overflowing with spiritual blessings. That's the message from Ephesians for this first Sunday of the new year. Just listen to the words: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing...he chose us in Christ...He destined us for adoption...to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved...." That grace is "lavished on us." And the mystery of God's will has been "made known to us." So the seal of the Holy Spirit marks us, because redemption has been promised to us.

None of this is our doing, friends. Most of us can look back on 2013 and find no good reason why God would lavish such blessings on us! We have a really hard time accepting the

fact that God will just give us something we didn't earn. After all, in this valley, we're supposed to earn everything. Yet many of us play by the rules, work really hard, and end up feeling as if we haven't earned much of anything. Maybe that's why God was always worshipped on mountains and not in valleys. God doesn't work the way this valley works.

This isn't a merit system. Forget about stacked ranking. Before you were even conceived, God chose you to be saved. Before you had your first chance to mess up, God had already sent Jesus to proclaim forgiveness for your sins. You already own this, even if you aren't yet in full possession of it. Salvation already has your name on it. The deal is signed and sealed by the Holy Spirit. All you have to do is accept it.

Now people like Ruby and Grace are ready for it. But some of us are still fighting it. If we could only accept the unbelievable generosity of God's grace, nothing else could touch us. Not that our troubles would be over. Oh no. What I

mean is this: because of what God has already done for us, it ultimately doesn't matter what happens to us. You name it: drought, disease, famine, financial ruin, hardship, heartache, physical pain, marital problems, addictions, depression, job stress, loneliness, poverty, war, even Congress. I don't minimize any of it. It's all bad, but none of it can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. [Romans 8:35-39]

That's a promise. And that's our freedom. In Christ, God has set us free from worrying about every dreadful possibility, or succumbing to any crushing reality. In Christ, we can actually look forward to 2014, no matter what it holds for us because we know who is already there for us.

To those about to embark on a new semester, a new job, a new relationship, a new phase of their life's journey, I say, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say Rejoice...The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made

known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." [Philippians 4:4,5b,6-7] Go with God.

To the families who are still working through difficult life transitions, I offer this hope, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." Hang in there. [Romans 8:28]

To the parents in Oakland who are keeping their daughter's body alive even though her brain has died, I send this message, "Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord." 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them.'" [Revelation 14:13] Let her go.

To the ones here who are anticipating a year of tests and treatments, I quote St. Paul: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of

Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies." [2 Corinthians 4:8-10] May God strengthen you.

To the ones who are living with chronic pain and the ones who are tirelessly caring for them, I give these words of encouragement, "we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

[Romans 5:3-5] We are praying for you.

To the ones who are looking ahead in their life and not wanting to have to live through it alone, God says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." [Isaiah 43:1-3] We are here for you.

And, finally, to the ones who are desperately seeking a meal, a job, a safe place to live, a second chance at life, I say, remember what Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." [Luke 4:18] God bless you.

For everyone who is in Christ, 2014 is the year of the Lord's favor. And we can trust this year to bring us:

a time to be healthy and a time to be sick
a time to be strong and a time to be weak
a time to grow and a time to shrink

a time to be hurt and a time to heal
a time to remember and a time to forget
a time to judge and a time to forgive

a time to have courage and a time to be afraid
a time to be certain and a time to be confused
a time to accept and a time to refuse

a time to listen and a time to speak
a time to care and a time to confront
a time to give and a time to receive

a time to destroy and a time to rebuild
a time to leave and a time to return
a time to let go and a time to get going

a time to end and a time to begin
a time to lose and a time to win
a time to die and a time to live

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter
under heaven." But there is no time that is not God's time.

So whatever we are facing in 2014, let's live each day as an
opportunity for God to be good and for grace to be amazing.

Just be ready for that drought to break, for that downpour of
blessings, which in the fullness of time will make each of us

holy and blameless before him in love. Happy New Year.