

Bigger than the Past

“Every man should be born again on the first of January. Start with a fresh page. Take up one hole more in the buckle, if necessary, or let down one, according to circumstances; but, on the first of January let every man gird himself once more, with his face to the front, and take interest in the things that are and are to be, and not in the things that were and are past.”—Henry Ward Beecher

We Armenians are an ancient people with a great cultural heritage. One of our church’s great strengths is that it values tradition; we preserve whatever good we have known from the past, and bring it into the present. As is almost always the case, however, that which is your strength can also be your weakness. I have found that a particular challenge for Armenians is that we tend to not only preserve the good we have known in the past, but also the bad—nursing grudges, slights, and old wounds.

Today, standing on the threshold of a new year in God’s house, I want to call our attention to the first step in looking forward to a blessed new year; that is, letting go of the old one. Many cultures have rituals to help us let go of the past. Traditionally in England, at the stroke of midnight, they open the back door to let the old year out and the front door to a new year, as the first guest brings gifts for prosperity in the New Year. In Denmark, on New Year’s Day, your doorway may be blocked with a pile of broken dishes, thrown by well-wishing friends to keep the brokenness of the past in the past. And finally in Panama, they actually burn effigies, images of well-known people to burn away what remains of the past, and look to the New Year with a fresh start. There is much wisdom in all of this. To enter the New Year with a clean slate, we have to break open, sweep out and burn off all hurts, failures and ill will towards others.

Our church also conveys this wisdom. Two days ago, the Shahnasarian family, little baby Michael and I stood at the threshold of our church doors, God’s house. We turned toward the door, put up our hands and “pushed out” evil three times before turning ahead to the altar—to the future of this family—Illuminated by the “light of the knowledge of God.” To enter a new year, a new phase in our life journey with God, we have to turn our backs on the strife, enmity and hurts which are handed down to each of us in our familial DNA. This church ritual, and many more like it, complements the Apostle Paul’s words in today’s chosen reading as we stand on the threshold of a New Year. Paul says, “this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

To enter a new year, a new phase, a new season in life, you have to let go of the old and let God bless the new. It is so easy to say. And sitting here today, on a nice day in church, we probably can’t even feel that we have trouble letting go, that we have any bad feelings toward others, lingering ill will and wounds to let go. Most of us try to put such thoughts as far away from us as often as we can. But, trust me as your pastor, they are there, and they are the main way that the evil one holds us back from being what we are to fully be as individuals, as families as a church.

Who is that person in your family, or this church family that you are still hurt by and have lingering bad feelings? If we deny that we are hurt, if we pretend it’s no big deal, we invite this evil into a New Year, rearing its evil head when we least expect it. Instead, ask God to help you put off this past injury, forgive and bless the year ahead. What is it that you regret from last year, that you should have done but didn’t? If we deny our falling short, pretend it’s no big deal, we invite this soul-eating cancer into a New Year. Instead, ask God to help wipe away your regret, forgive yourself and try again with God’s blessing in the New Year.

The only known and proven way for next year to be better than the last is for you and I to be better than the last, to be bigger than past. For this, we need God’s help, and the Apostle Paul’s simple prescription: “this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” May God give us the courage and the grace to sweep out and close the door on the past, and begin a New Year with faith and focus “on the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus,” now and always; amen.