



New Year's Resolutions

TEXT
Matthew 4:23-25

January 3, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

If you have ever read the promotions for a trip or researched a trip, which is something I think I remember I used to do, back in an earlier life, the descriptions of what the trip will be like are often intriguing. Like this sentence from the travel guide for an Alaskan cruise: *Remote and not far away, Alaska is pure, profound, and alive with wildness on land and sea. Sail alongside pods of orca, see breaching humpbacks, and foraging brown bears.*

I'd like to go. It's a promise of the kind of experience you will have if you take that trip.

The text we read from Matthew is what biblical scholars call a "summary passage." It lists the kinds of things that Jesus did, without specifics. He taught and preached and healed and cast out demons. It's a bit like a travel brochure for discipleship. If you are going to take this trip with Jesus, you will witness these kinds of things.

It's a good passage for the first Sunday of the year, because it invites us to reflect on what kind of journey we wish for in 2021.

In just a few moments, our newest elders will share in the traditional ordination vows that

all officers and pastors affirm. They are some pretty big promises, and in a sense, they provide something of a summary of Christian life.

We will ask them several questions, including "Do you trust in Jesus Christ your savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and head of the church?"

And we will ask, "Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them subject to the ordering of God's word and Spirit?"

And also, "Do you promise to further the peace, unity and purity of the church?"

They are big questions and point to what it is like to follow Jesus.

Since coming to Village, Carol and I have established a tradition we enjoy for New Year's Day. We care very little about the parades. But we light our gas fireplace and get our coffee, and we start thinking about the year just past and what we have done and learned and how we have grown. And then for the year to come, we make a plan of sorts. Some might call them resolutions, but I think of it more as a plan. It's fun. I always list how many books I'm hoping to read during the year and identify a few of them by title. I looked

back, and we both met that goal in 2020.

Carol is more practical, and often includes the particular house projects we are going to budget for in the coming year. We did pretty well in 2020 with that plan as well.

One goal we utterly failed at was our relationship goals. We had planned to have friends over, and we were going to find three new restaurants in 2020. Well, COVID rained on that parade.

Part of our conversation is also spiritual. What do we need to do in 2021 to nourish our faith? What's the plan for that?

One goal on my list, and it's a goal I am sharing with you, is to discern what lessons I hope to have learned from this past difficult year. As I've said, next week I will begin a sermon series, "2020 Was My Teacher." As we move out of 2020, what spiritual lessons have we learned? To reflect on that is part of my plan for 2021.

What about you? You might think about a spiritual plan for 2021.

It should no doubt include worship. Whether that is traditional worship or the Gathering or a combination of the two, our souls thirst for time with God, and worship is what defines us

as Christian people. You might think of worship as an experience, something that inspires you or informs you or brings a bit of peace. And inasmuch as worship does that, it's a good thing. But more than an experience, worship is a practice. It is the regular engagement of the story that defines the truth for us. And for it to be more than an experience, but a defining practice, it is something that must be done regularly. So, how often do you want to worship in 2021?

You might want to take a class here. Some of you do that all the time. I'm not suggesting that everyone needs to do that all the time, but if we are going to grow in faith, then part of that journey is learning. Jesus was a teacher. So, you might set a goal to take at least one class from Village University; many of those offerings are online. You might decide this is the year you are going to be part of a Village Connect group. The conversations with others in the group can be a real source of spiritual growth.

Our new elders will be asked: "Do you accept the scriptures to be the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ ... and God's word to you?" For these old words to breathe to life and become God's word to us, we have to read them and ponder them.

The disciples testify that following Jesus meant they had to learn to think differently. That's still true. So maybe your spiritual plan involves a class or two.

But you also may need something different this year. You may need to engage in service of some

sort. I use that word that you may think of working at the pantry or volunteering to tutor a child, and those kinds of things are certainly service. I hope before the end of 2021, we can begin our mission trips again.

But service is also what these new officers are embracing. They will give hours and energy and wisdom to lead our church. Before the year is out, we are going to need help with our children's ministry and our music ministry and, well ... you get it. Everything we do requires the service of our congregation. Think about ways that you might be able to share some of your time. And here's the thing: We don't do that because of what it means to us. When we serve, we do it because it matters to others; but more often than not, it feeds us as well. Think about a time or a practice of sharing time in service of others. And if you can't do that here, maybe just commit some time each week to pray for Village. Pray that we might be faithful in 2021. Pray for our officers and staff here, and for those who lead us. Maybe use your star word as a guide in prayer ... or even journal.

Part of our spiritual plan each year is financial. We tithe to Village, 10 percent. But we also support other important ministries in our city. I know that many in 2020 have faced the hardest year of their lives financially. For some, it will take years to recover from, but if you are working or your income remains, you might want to make a plan of how you will share what you have as a witness to your faith.

Maybe you have other needs. These are certainly not the only ways to grow in faith, but let me invite you to take some time this week and think about the year that God is giving us, and how you would like to use it for your faith.

The thing about travel brochures is they always sound amazing. A brochure for travel to Hawaii says this: *Discover the glimmering ocean, emerald valleys and golden sands; get lost in the spiritual beauty of the hula and find out how the warmth of Hawaii's people wonderfully complement the islands' perfect temperatures.* Sounds great!

The travel description to follow Jesus is less glamorous, but it's honest. *There are demons to face. There are lessons to learn. There are meals to share. There are injuries to heal. But in the midst of all of that, there is an encounter with God that leaves us amazed.*

So, what's your plan for this journey of faith we are on? Give that some thought this week. It might become a tradition that enriches your life every year.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermon-sermon-archives.html>.