

Working on the Warp and Woof of 1999

A sermon with readings from Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-18

Don Friesen
Ottawa Mennonite Church
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About ten or twelve years ago a television network carried the story of a senior citizen in the United States who was declared dead by that country's Social Security Administration, only he was not dead! Whatever glitch, technical or otherwise, caused the undeserved demise of this elderly fellow, it caused him no end of inconvenience. His cheques stopped coming. Stores refused to honour his credit cards, or took them away! He had trouble getting health care. It took him well over a year to get things straightened away. When his death notice appeared in the local paper, he called the editor to request a correction. The editor expressed his regrets, but said, "Cheer up, my friend, tomorrow I'll put your name in the birth column, and give you a fresh start!"

A new year always feels like a fresh start. I know that it's a somewhat artificial mark on the calendar, and that most of us are much the same people we were three days ago, but psychologically, it's a new beginning! New beginnings create new energy and an eagerness to try new things! Start new projects! For some of us, it's like being given a new notebook! Another chance to break in a notebook, and to organize it in such a way that our accumulated daily notations form a coherent narrative. For others this approach feels like an attempt to force a template upon experiences that defy coherence. Perhaps a looser metaphor, like weaving, might serve us better. In weaving a tapestry or fabric, the threads stretched lengthwise in a loom are called the warp, and the threads woven across the warp are called the woof. If you think of the year ahead as another metre or two added to the fabric of your life, there are things that could be done to make the fabric more attractive.

Warp: Threads of Blessing

I think our reading from the New Testament letter to the Ephesians provides us with a pattern of sorts to guide our weaving in the year ahead. In this passage the Apostle Paul waxes almost poetic; in fact, in Greek, the entire, long passage from verse 3 to verse 14 is one sentence! It's a long and complicated sentence, but one that represents not so much a reasoned statement as a lyrical song of praise! A symphony of love, if you will. Paul begins, not with a daily planner approach to life, but with a message grand and cosmic. He begins with God, with the Creator of heaven and earth who, in an amazing act of love and grace has showered us with blessings.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," he writes, "who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing...." (Ephesians 1:3) And then he goes on to identify a number of these blessings. Verse 4— God "chose" us; verse 5—"He destined us for adoption as his children...." Verse 6—He "freely bestowed" upon us "glorious grace". Verse 7 speaks of the "riches of His grace" that He "lavished upon us," adding that in God "...we have redemption... (and) the forgiveness of our trespasses...." God also "made known to us the mystery of His will"—verse 9. Verses 11 through 13—"In

Christ we have also obtained an inheritance,” “hope,” the “word of truth,” the “gospel of...salvation,” and the “Holy Spirit”. Verse 14 repeats mention of our “inheritance” and “redemption,” and elsewhere in these verses Paul speaks twice of God’s “good pleasure!” (1:5 and 9)

Our Ephesians passage is a very upbeat passage with a very positive message. The Creator of heaven and earth, in an amazing act of love and grace has chosen us, adopted us, forgiven us, redeemed us. Another version renders verse 5, “He destined us in love to be his (children)...” (Ephesians 1:5, RSV) What a wonderful, masterful and hopeful phrase with which to enter the last year of this century and this millennium—“Destined in Love”. The hopefulness of this phrase is even more apparent when you look at other uses of the word in the Bible; it’s often used in a negative way, as in “destined for the sword” (Job 15:22; Isaiah 65:12), “destined for pestilence, ...destined for famine, ...destined for captivity” (Jeremiah 15:2; 43:11), “destined to be lost” (John 17:12), “destined for destruction” (2 Thessalonians 2:3).

In our Ephesians passage the word is used in an unabashedly positive way. God “destined us in love to be his (children)...” (Ephesians 1:5, RSV); “He destined us for adoption as his children..., according to the good pleasure of his will....” (NRSV) Lest we consider the blessings enumerated by Paul to be but vague, spiritual blessings, consider his allusion to adoption. The ritual of adoption in those times was no simple matter. It was carried out by a symbolic sale with the use of copper and scales. Twice the real father sold his child, and twice he symbolically bought him back; finally he sold him a third time, and at the third sale he did not buy him back. After this the adopting father had to go to one of the principal Roman magistrates, and plead the case for adoption. Only after all this had been gone through was the adoption complete, but it was complete indeed. The person who had been adopted had all the rights of a legitimate child in his new family. In the eyes of the law he was a new person, so new that all debts and obligations connected with his previous family were abolished as if they had never existed. Similarly, our adoption as children of God grants us a clean slate, a new beginning.

It may be helpful to think of the spiritual blessings enumerated by Paul as the bold and gaily- coloured threads that form the warp of the year ahead. These threads are a given; they are the blessings of faith—our spiritual inheritance. Mixed in with them are smaller threads, the more personal blessings that touch each one of us on a daily basis—the company of loved ones; the sense of achievement in projects well done; the blessing of good health; the company of good books, music, and art. As we enter this new year we already have a good half of the material needed to make our own tapestry.

Woof: Cross-threads

The threads that are woven across the warp of this tapestry can only be supplied by time; they are the threads of our daily activities and interactions. Some of the threads we weave may seem insignificant. We may think that our daily activities and interactions are simply routine—nothing exceptional about them—except that large and striking designs are impossible without the many small threads that form them, and significant developments in our lives are often the accumulation of many small, daily decisions.

Even small, seemingly insignificant events can have far-reaching consequences. Consider that Jesus was born in very humble circumstances. There was no particular reason to see his birth as significant for any more than a handful of people. It was just one birth among many, in a shed, in a small town, in a troubled province, on the outer edges of the Roman Empire. Most of the people living at that time hadn't even heard of the Roman Empire, let alone Israel or Bethlehem or some obscure carpenter recently married to a pregnant young woman.

Even Josephus (37 CE - c.100 CE), the chief historian of the period, devotes but two short paragraphs to Jesus and his followers. Josephus published his lengthy history of the Jews in the year 93, and in discussing the period in which the Jews of Judea were governed by the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate, Josephus includes a very brief synopsis of Jesus' life and death, ending on a rather sceptical note, saying, "And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared." (Jewish Antiquities)

The way Josephus sums up Christianity doesn't sound very promising, but here we gather, one thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine years later, united in purpose with about a quarter of the world's population! Here we are, two millennia later, celebrating the tremendous impact this one life has had and continues to have upon civilization. One generation after another has looked to him as their Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, and the reign of peace and justice he inaugurated continues to inspire countless dreams of human harmony and well-being. From little things, big things grow. As Jesus himself said, the reign of God is like a mustard seed, a tiny seed from which arises a magnificent tree.

It would have been easy for Mary and Joseph, all alone, far from home, and with nowhere to stay, to give up hope and despair of even surviving the week! But sheltered in a shed in No-wheres-ville, squatting in the straw, Mary became the mother of God. Joseph became the trembling midwife whose hands drew God-made-flesh, squirming and gasping, into the world. Together they became the bearers of God into our human existence. As John writes, "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, ...full of grace and truth. ...From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." (John 1:14 and 16)

Weaving Requires Work

Any person who works with fabric knows that some colours or shapes on their own may not look like much, but when put together they look stunning! Similarly, what may strike us as a negative or uncomfortable experience in the year ahead may look fabulous when woven across the threads of our spiritual inheritance—God's blessings! Weaving, like many other things, however, doesn't just happen. It requires time, effort and imagination. Sometimes it takes considerable work to weave the cross-threads of our life into the longer threads of God's blessings in such a way that they are pleasing to the eye and the spirit.

Last week Margaret Urrutia gave me an article about a Chicago couple who in 1973 set out with their five children on a family vacation in a van filled with camping equipment. They got as far as Montana, where one night their seven year old daughter, Susie, disappeared from the tent in which four of the children were sleeping. The canvas of the tent had been slit during the night, and it became clear that Susie had been

kidnapped. The story of the family coping with the search for Susie is dramatic enough, but even more compelling is the spiritual homework done by Susie's mother, Marietta, in the year that followed.

In the early days of the search Marietta said to her husband that even if the kidnapper returned Susie unharmed, she would happily kill him with her bare hands. That same night, near dawn, she heard a voice—an echo of her strict Catholic upbringing, perhaps, reminding her to love her enemies and to pray for those who hurt her. It was a turning-point for her, and she fell into the first deep sleep she'd had since Susie vanished.

Though Marietta's work on the threads of forgiveness began, not with a rush of compassion, but with a weary willingness to try, she worked very hard in the next year to transform her loathing for the kidnapper into something approaching understanding. Every weekday afternoon, in the lull that followed lunch, Marietta worked on thinking of the kidnapper as a member of the human race. The exercise began in a purely mechanical way, as she resolved not to talk about the kidnapper in sub-human terms, no matter how great the temptation. She even asked those who empathized with her to tone down their language, letting them know she was working in a different direction. She prayed for the kidnapper, trying to think of one good thing to wish on him, though the exercise grated on her and the work became harder each time a development in the case rekindled her rage.

The fruit of this labourious process of trying to forgive came a year later when one year to the minute after Susie was snatched from her tent, the kidnapper called Marietta. Amazingly, she was able to talk to him in a calm voice and relaxed manner, though he was calling to taunt her. When she heard his voice, mocking though it was, she realized something had genuinely shifted within her. She was desperate for word of Susie, but her efforts in weaving the threads of forgiveness into the fabric of the past year allowed her to see this man as something other than evil personified. In fact, he stayed on the line with her for over an hour, softening substantially after she asked, "What can we do to help you?"

The authorities were able to trace the call, the man was arrested, and he confessed that he had murdered Susie about a week after kidnapping her. He also confessed to several other murders, and but a few hours after his confession took his own life. It is not a happy story, but it is a profoundly moving one, for Marietta also befriended the kidnapper's mother. She says, "If anyone thinks forgiveness is for wimps, they haven't tried it. It takes daily, diligent discipline." (Ann Japenga, "Forgiveness," "Health," May/June 1998)

It may be timely, at the beginning of a new year, to ask ourselves, "To what shall I bring some diligent, spiritual discipline in the year ahead? What do I need to work on to make the fabric of my life more pleasing to God?" Perhaps it's an interior matter, such as jealousy, anger, or envy. Perhaps it's a relational matter, such as faithfulness, or friendship. Perhaps a re-dedication of ourselves—to God, to the Church, to our spouse, to our children.

As we enter this new year, may we be conscious of the preciousness of time. Each day is a gift from God. May we use each one with care and appreciation, weaving our thoughts and our actions into a glorious tapestry for God. AMEN

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.