

Greeting this new year

Ephesians 2: 1-10

Mark 1: 40-45

[Augsburg College Chapel, 14 January 2009]

I was struck this New Year's – more than I remember in my 52 years – of the blunt proclamation that resonated in press reports and beyond as the new year turned that it was good riddance to 2008 and happy days ahead in 2009. This was not your normal “whew”, we made it – instead, it was a deep longing to cross the arbitrary dateline of January 1 and into a new year full of hope and promise – despite the obvious evidence that what we didn't like about 2008 – wars around the world, economic disasters, a real sense of anxiety and fear about our personal and social lives – were still very much a reality in 2009.

Now, I will admit to sharing a bit in this act of delusion. There were parts of our life here at Augsburg this past fall that I would be happy to put behind me – the tragic deaths of three students, the implications of the economic situation for our budgets and fundraising, some of the less than civil behavior that surrounded elections, and the general unease we all felt as we witnessed tumultuous times in our world. But I am quickly jolted back to reality – even in a new year – by the facts of violence, of economic turmoil, of partisan politics, of genuine fear – that continue to rear their ugly heads even here in our college community.

My real concern, though, is not with the facts and reality of the human condition, whether in 2008 or two weeks later in 2009. Rather I want to explore what it is about our sense of responsibility (or lack thereof) for that reality that allows us to believe – however delusionally – that crossing into a new year has even the potential to mean that all will be well. I want to consider what it means to greet this new year as people of faith and responsibility.

Our reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians offers us a pretty clear picture of the context in which faithful people must face our responsibility in the world. “You were dead through trespasses and sins, in which you once lived, following the course of the world, following the ruler of the power of the air, that spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient,” Paul writes, indicting all of us for the ways in which we are complicit in the state of the world and the human condition. Economies and governments and countries and colleges are not disconnected, depersonalized entities. They are not someone else's problem. They are

us – each of us, individually and corporately. They bear the mark of what Paul calls the passions of the flesh, our natural inclinations to want more than we need, to take what we want from others, to pursue violence instead of peace, to think it is all right to lie and cheat and steal to get ahead, to use up the earth's resources without considering future generations – the passions of the flesh that lie behind crippled economies, gigantic corporate scandals, senseless murders and wars, a fractured world.

As people of faith, then, what is the responsible and faithful way to enter a new year? I would suggest that we must greet the new year liturgically, if you will, at worship – as we do each day here in our chapel. Our fitting response to the new year is to confess our sins, ask God's gracious forgiveness, and then offer our hearts and minds and hands in service to God's work in the world. We must admit our own complicity in all that we didn't much like about the past, celebrating with the Apostle Paul the essential promise of salvation by God's grace through faith, and then proclaiming with Paul, "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." God's promise that calls us to our faithful way of life.

God did not intend for God's people to live this way – to suffer from economic downturns, to kill each other, to cheat and steal, to misuse the gifts of creation – and yet here we are, mired in the darkness and violence of our own making. Can we find a way, like the leper in our gospel lesson for this morning, to kneel before our God with all of our dis-ease and unease, and confess, "If you choose (Jesus), you can make me clean"? Do we believe even more so that we will hear these gracious words in reply from the Great Healer, "I do choose. Be made clean!"?

I remember when growing up that my family and I often spent New Year's Eve at church, where my minister dad organized a "Watch Night" gathering for the community to come together and welcome the New Year. I hadn't really thought much about these events until reading in the newspapers on New Year's Day reports of the Watch Night services at various churches across the country this year. Intrigued, I did a bit more research, and learned that the first Watch Nights were organized by Moravians in Eastern Europe and then continued by Methodists in England in the 17th century. The services were primarily focused on renewing the covenant between God and God's people at the beginning of a new year. These services were adopted by many African-American churches in the United States when the Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863 – the Watch Night on New Year's Eve marked the vigil of freedom for slaves. The reason the Watch Night services got so much

attention this year is because many of the African-American churches were marking Barack Obama's election as an extension of the emancipation of all God's people, his election a symbol of freedom for all.

The power of the liturgies for these Watch Night services – no matter the tradition out of which they arose – is a reminder to all of us of how we might cross responsibly and faithfully into the new year. They begin where we all must begin – confessing our sins – one particular service begins this way: “O God, distant yet near, we gather as witnesses to your promises that if we seek you with all our hearts, we will find you...Hear the confessions of our mouths and the yearnings of our hearts. Help us change the narrowness of our vision and the pettiness of our living.” The service proceeds with testimony and the gospel promise of forgiveness and renewal. And it concludes with this powerful proclamation as the new year begins: “God has done a good and new thing! Our mission is to the world. Let us go forth boldly to proclaim the good news that is Jesus Christ. Christ has died, Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Amen and Amen.”

I find this liturgical form for greeting the new year even more powerful because of what I have learned from the work of Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of London, who argues that our ethics must always be linked to our devotion. What and how we worship, he says, defines how we live our lives. Similarly, Marty Haugen, whose hymn we sang to begin our chapel this morning, reminded me in a recent conversation of the inextricable links between what we sing in our liturgy – for example, all are welcome – and the practices and values of our lives in the world – hospitality, welcoming the stranger, openness to the rich diversity of God's world.

I'm thinking again about the leper in our gospel – unclean, kneeling before his redeemer, confessing his faith that Jesus can heal him. I'm celebrating the good news of Jesus' response – “I do choose – choose you, choose healing, choose life.” And then I'm wondering about Jesus' admonition to the leper now healed not to share this news with anyone – that, we're told by the commentators, is part of Mark's theological purposes in this story. But, of course, nothing will keep the newly healed from proclaiming and spreading the good news!

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. That is the way to greet each new day, Martin Luther instructed us, perhaps even more so a way to greet the new year, to greet this new year. God's responsible and faithful people know that because we have already been saved from our sins, the sin of the world, we are freed and called to do God's work in the

world – to be God's people of peace and reconciliation and justice and love and hope in a world that surely doesn't need any more self-delusion, a world that needs all of us to proclaim and live the good news, to choose healing and life in a fractured world. May it be so, as it was for the leper, that we cannot keep from shouting this good news to all of creation. Thanks be to God. Amen.