

“A HUMBLE SPIRIT”

a sermon on Exodus 32:7-14, Psalm 51, I Timothy 1:12-17, and Luke 15:1-10
September 11, 2016, by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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I want to take you back in time this morning. The year is 1999. It's December 31st. New Year's Eve. I remember it well. Not just the welcoming in of a new *year*, or even a decade or a century, but an actual new *millennium*. It felt momentous.

Of course, there was the “Y2K” thing, so it also felt a bit *perilous*. When I started thinking about going this route for today's sermon, I went back and read the last sermon I preached in 1999 – on December 24th – and the first one I preached in 2000 – on January second.

There was some *actual* fear out there about what might happen when clocks struck 12:00 midnight around the world – what computers might go completely bezerk, and start shutting down power grids, or air traffic control systems, or who knows what.

Our denomination had this wonderful idea about a mass gathering of youth and young adults for the New Year's celebration – 30,000 or so they first predicted. In the end, they barely broke one thousand – because parents were worried about their children getting stranded in airports, or worse.

And I remember vividly the scene I then painted in my sermon on January second, of sitting the kitchen at my in-law's house in Pensacola on that December 31st afternoon watching the year 2000 arrive across the globe in live, satellite-feed broadcasts from Moscow; and then Bethlehem and Egypt; and then Paris, Berlin, and Rome; and then London, and Madrid. And all without so much as a temporary flicker of the lights. And then I wrote this:

[It was] fascinating. Amazing. And perhaps the most amazing part of all was that despite our many divisions and *differences*, last Friday night the world seemed somehow *united* in its spirit of celebration. The sights and sounds varied. Different music. Different colors. Different *traditions*. But a common *celebration*, and perhaps a growing awareness that when all is said and done, it is the same sun that rises and sets over every continent, and the same *planet earth* on which we all dwell.

Strangely, even the infamous Y2K “bug” added to that unity. It made everyone want to *pay attention* to everyone else and see what was going on in other places.

All in all, it was a *hopeful* time – the dawn of the new millennium. A time when a lot of people were beginning to think maybe the people of the world really *can* all get along, and work together for a common good.

It was certainly a hopeful time for me personally. It was the year I became a Presbytery Executive, and I was full of hopeful ideas for ministry.

Now fast forward a bit, to another date. Just the next year, 2001. The date is the same as today’s on the calendar – September 11. In north Mississippi, it was one of those lovely, clear, early fall mornings when a cool front had gone through, and it was absolutely gorgeous outside. Do you remember it? Remember where you were on this day, fifteen years ago? It was a Tuesday. Like any other Tuesday. I was getting dressed to go into work, watching the morning news on television in the bedroom. A breaking story about a plane hitting one of the world trade center towers. The first “experts” to weigh in were trying to downplay the absolute necessity of concluding that it was intentional. Navigational systems can go haywire. Emergencies can occur on board.

And then it happened. The *second* plane hit. I actually *watched* it. Live. And I knew that in that instant, life in America had changed. Perhaps life everywhere. But definitely, life in America. I eventually pulled myself away from it, and drove to the office. I remember feeling guilty walking from my car to the door about how beautiful a day it was, and how good it felt, when there was so much pain and grief all around.

Today’s lectionary readings are pretty heavy stuff – about sin, and repentance, about God’s anger, and wrath, but also about God “repenting,” and the heavenly host “rejoicing.” If there is a common theme woven into the passages, it is that we have this human tendency to think we’ve got it all figured out, or if we have a problem, we can fix it. And that at the end of the day, it’s about us. How God has blessed *us*. Us as individuals. Us as families. Us as communities. Us as a *nation*. And what each reading says is, *no it isn’t*. It’s either about *everybody*, or it’s about *nobody*.

We begin in Exodus. Moses has been “delayed,” it says at the beginning of chapter 32, up on the mountain top . . . with God. And the people get nervous and fearful. So Aaron falls back on what he knows. He collects their gold, and fashions a calf – a golden idol – for them to worship. Back under control.

God is so angry that he makes Moses an offer. Moses, you can be the new Abraham. I'll make a great nation of *you*, instead of the *whole* lot of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob's offspring.

And did you hear in the reading what it was Moses said that changed God's mind in the matter? He said, "why should the Egyptians say, 'it was with evil intent that [God] brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth?'"

Therefore, he went on, "remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants" and what you swore to them.

It wasn't for the sake of the Israelites that God changed his mind. It was for the sake of the Egyptians. God didn't choose Abraham and his descendants for the sake of Abraham and his descendants. He chose them so that they could "be a witness" to the world.

Next up, our Psalm for the morning, the opening directions to the worship leaders for which read as follows: "To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." It is a psalm of grief, and repentance, rightly so. And David, the King, might have appealed to God on the basis of his greatness. "Restore me, O God, because Israel needs a great, strong leader."

But at that moment in his life, at least, David was humble, as the psalm proclaims. "restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit . . . then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you." Don't do it for me. Do it because in being so restored that others will see, and learn, and come to you.

Paul's story is not so different, as told this morning in First Timothy – words of instruction being passed down to a young new leader in the Christian Church. "though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence . . . the grace of our Lord overflowed for me the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." But not because he, Paul, was so special to God. Rather, "I received mercy, so that *in me*, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might *display* the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life."

And lastly, the Gospel according to Luke. Little stories about the lost. A lost sheep from the fold, a lost coin from the purse.

The chapter begins by noting that Jesus had attracted a very motley crowd. “Tax collectors and sinners,” to be exact. And then, we also know by this point that the crowd included the diseased and crippled, and outcasts of various other sorts.

To the respected ones in that society, it was despicable. Jesus actually *ate* with these people. For a supposed “holy man” to do such a thing in a society where remaining “clean” in order to keep one’s access to the temple was so important was *unthinkable*.

And once again, the point is that they have forgotten *why* God chose Israel in the first place. *Not for themselves*, but so that they could be a blessing to the world. It’s not the ones who remained in the fold . . . or the purse . . . in the first place for whom there is joyful praise in heaven. It is for the one who was lost, the “one sinner who repents.”

In some ways, these opening decades of the third millennium have been quite disappointing so far. But if anything has become clear to me, it is that we must be humble in how we see ourselves – as a church, as a presbytery and its denomination, and in the larger community realm even as Americans.

God has truly blessed all of those entities in the past. But not because we were better than anyone else. Only so that God’s mercy and grace, and blessings, could be made visible and shared. It’s either about *everyone*, or it’s about *no one*.

But living with a humble spirit really does open up possibilities for God’s light to shine through us. Out of every tragedy – even ones as horrific as 9/11, the recent mass shootings, but also natural disasters and tragedies of every other sort – come stories of hope and grace.

The sacrifice God *accepts*, is a humble spirit. One that doesn’t have to fix everything, or control everything, or know everything, but that trusts, and accepts, and welcomes, and lives gratefully. May we be that people, and through our lives and service, may the heavens rejoice over lost ones who find their way home.

To God be the glory.