***“Blessings for the New Year”***

**Psalm 148**

**January 1, 2023**

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2022 will always be a special year for me. In the vernacular of Lemony Snicket, due to a series of unfortunate events, I was able to stretch my legs as acting head of staff pastor from February 1st through the end of July. I would like to start off the new year by saying, I work with outstanding colleagues whether in music, education, administration, or facilities. The House of Hope staff is a dedicated and creative group of professionals who love this congregation and know how to do church. Everyone stepped up to meet the needs of each day.

Our Session which has now undergone one class change since January, is also a hard-working group; they put in extra time to do deferred tasks. And I will call out the personnel committee who had to work overtime addressing changes. Our deacons and trustees did not miss a beat in their leadership responsibilities, and many volunteers kept things like communion, funeral receptions, stuffing bulletins, and more, on the move.

We walked through a faithful Lenten season and kicked off our preaching series with Linda Loving's performance of Julian on Saturday April 9th. She preached on Palm Sunday and I preached on Easter Sunday.

Then . . .  Boom  . . . I left. The Session approved my sabbatical at their November 2021 meeting but from January forward, I was not sure that it would take place; Personnel never waivered and made it happen. And at a certain point, I knew I had to go. I had to have a break before I broke.

Many of you blessed me and my time away as you left the sanctuary on Easter and in the weeks before. I felt completely supported in the gift of time away. As I reported to the Session, it felt like there was grace in every step I took. What I also reported to the Session was that in stopping and resting, I found a well of grief within from the loss and change of the last five years.

So at the beginning of this new year, I want to talk about Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius developed a series of spiritual exercises, one of which is the practice of daily introspection called The Examen. The idea is, at the end of each day, we look at what happened during the day to write down our blessings or what he terms as consolations and also to name those things which brought sadness, guilt, or the need for reconciliation; the scriptures would name these as curses, Ignatius called them desolations.

According to one Ignatian writer, a constant awareness of our consolations directs our focus outside and beyond ourselves. They lift our hearts so that we can see the joys of others and have compassion for their sorrows. Consolation bonds us in human community and inspires new ideas; it restores balance and refreshes our inner vision. When practiced long enough, it reveals where and how God is active in our lives and where God is leading us. Consolations release new from energy within.

Desolations on the other hand turn us in on ourselves. They drive us down a spiral ever deeper into our own negative feelings and cut us off from community. Desolations make us want to give up on the things that used to be important to us. They can take over our whole consciousness and affect our ability to look into the distance and have a vision with hope. One author said that desolation “covers up all of our landmarks,” a word she used to describe the signs that God has been active in our lives. Of course, these drain us of energy. (Vanita Hampton Wright, “Ignatian Spirituality,” accessed on 12/25/2022 at 5:30 a.m.)

I first came to know about the Ignatian practice of the Examen from a book by Dennis Linn, his wife Sheila Fabricant Linn and his brother Matthew Linn. The book is titled, *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*. As they explain, “During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. . . . Finally someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, ‘Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow’.”

The Linns have authored many books on spiritual life and practice and they have stated that this is the simplest book that they have ever written because the practice is simple. They suggest we ask two questions at the end of each day: For what am I most grateful? And for what am I least grateful?

I’d like to say just a few more words about Easter Sunday morning. At the end of the service and after the benediction, I walked to the back of the sanctuary as Aaron took his into Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus. When I reached the last rows, Matt handed me a hymnal supplement, already open and ready to roll, and Deb James stepped out to stand beside me and help me find the alto line. Do not underestimate the power of small acts of kindness and belonging.

The children who learned to sleep again because they had bread, had desolation visited upon them by circumstances in the world. Ukraine is being desolated by the will of a Russian autocrat, raised in the bosom of the KGB and who cannot honor the political borders of the present world. Today, we must also think of the folks in Buffalo NY, flooding in California, COVID in China, and the unrest in Peru; desolation can be an outward reality, a natural disaster, or human malfeasance. However large or small, it affects the human spirit and soul.

A practice of finding daily gratitude is how we learn that even in the midst of an outward desolation, there are consolations, however small. And the big reveal is that desolations often bring us closer to God, we are never alone with that which feels miserable or barren, there is comfort and companionship from God. We might eventually discern that some experiences of desolation were, in fact, consolation.

So, as we are all rebuilding our lives from the closures and changes during the pandemic, a desolation visited upon us, I ask: “What are you least grateful for?” “What are you most grateful for?”

And as we are rebuilding our congregational life due to our own changes as well as decades of cultural change outside our walls, I ask: “What are we least grateful for?” “What are we most grateful for?”

God is always preparing a creative and blessed way ahead but we cannot catch the vision if we are stuck or have lost the trail of God’s leading because of spiritual half-heartedness; as one of my spiritually strong friends said to me recently, “We all have an inner Putin.”

I invite us all to log three answers to each of these questions every day for a month or more. It might be winning the lottery but more likely, a warm home, running water, the growing light, good news from a friend, or clear roads! And we all have ingratitudes, hardships, and losses are a part of being human and not a sin. If we name them, they don’t surprise us and we can give them to God for the sake of wholeness.

Some say we are human beings learning to be spiritual–others emphasize that we are spiritual beings learning to be human; today, I highlight this second way of thinking. The saints and mystics have always known the interior life runs the exterior life. The unexamined, dark side either spends decades lying pitiably by the side of the healing pool unable to find a way into the water or ends up taking selfies while breaching the nation’s capital with flag poles made into spears.

In the long arc of creation and salvation, *kairos*, God’s time is large and beyond our scope. We live in *chronos*, so let us begin this new year with the awareness of our own spiritual illness and wellness. These past years have held blessings but have also been challenging and contentious. A will to name our discontent but not wallow in it and a will to receive our blessings as joy and compassion will go a long way in creating and honing the community of healing we all need. These practices allow us to keep an outward focus and to praise God as with our living as well as speech as freely and passionately as the Psalmist. So, as we, today, receive bread for the journey, giving thanks as we take and eat, let us do so that we may live and act for the good on behalf of the many near and far who need bread in hand in order to sleep.

Amen.