

Not So Fast!

Proverbs 1:20-25

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Congratulations! You did it. You made it. You survived 2020. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that you endured 2020. And that is no small feat. I've got a little countdown app on my cell phone. It automatically counts down the days until something that I'm looking forward to, like a vacation or my annual bike ride across Iowa. But since last July that little app has been counting down to just one event I was really looking forward to – the end of 2020 and the start of a new year, and hopefully, a better year.

While 2020 was no laughing matter, I did appreciate the occasional opportunity to laugh at this epic dumpster fire of a year. If you ever saw the movie "Back to the Future" you'll appreciate this meme of Doc Brown and Marty by the DeLorean time machine. Doc says, "Listen carefully Marty, whatever you do, don't set it to 2020!" [<https://imgflip.com/i/40cu3g>]

Needless to say, we are all glad that 2020 is behind us, and we hope and pray that 2021 holds better things. But before we rush into this New Year, I want to urge us to do something counter-intuitive today. I want us to pause and reflect on the year that we've just experienced. Why? Because the most important lessons that most of us have ever learned throughout life have not come through good time, but hard times. Challenges, hardship and struggle are excellent teachers. We risk throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater if we don't pause and reflect on what we've learned from 2020 and apply it to 2021.

There's a name for that process of reflecting and learning from the past, and then applying what we've learned. It's called wisdom. We grow wise when we invite the Holy Spirit to join us in reflecting on the past, learning what it has to teach us, and applying it to the present and the future. And I believe that that is exactly what the Spirit is calling us to do today.

The 31 chapters that make up the book of Proverbs are filled with the call to live with wisdom. In today's

Scripture reading, Wisdom is portrayed as a woman who begs people to live wisely so that they might avoid disaster, the kind of disaster that happens when we fail to learn the lessons of the past. Let's listen to these words from Proverbs 1:20-25:

²⁰ *Wisdom shouts in the streets.*

She cries out in the public square.

²¹ *She calls to the crowds along the main street,
to those gathered in front of the city gate:*

²² *"How long, you simpletons,*

will you insist on being simpleminded?

How long will you mockers relish your mocking?

How long will you fools hate knowledge?

²³ *Come and listen to my counsel.*

I'll share my heart with you

and make you wise.

²⁴ *I called you so often, but you wouldn't come.*

I reached out to you, but you paid no attention.

²⁵ *You ignored my advice*

and rejected the correction I offered."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

The book of Proverbs can be a little confusing at times. It contradicts itself on more than one occasion. But if we read it carefully, we'll discover that the central challenge of the book, the core calling of the book of Proverbs is to live wisely, to learn, guided by the Spirit. To learn all that life has to teach us and to then apply it. So, before we toss 2020 away like a carton of sour milk, let's learn what we can from it, and apply it to the New Year ahead of us.

I asked nearly 100 people in person and on social media what lessons they learned from 2020, and their responses were incredibly insightful. I want to quickly share with you the five most important lessons I heard in the hopes that you can join me in applying their wisdom to our lives, and coming up with wisdom of your own.

Lesson One: *Less is more*, especially when it comes to how we steward our time. Over and over again people said that when the pandemic began they grieved how many things got taken off their calendars, but as they adjusted to a slower pace, they realized just how quickly they'd been running through life and how much they were missing in the process. Time with family. Time with God. Time to just be. Time to pause and reflect and pray. It's no wonder Psalm 90:12 says,

“Teach us to use wisely all the time we have.” (CEV). When this pandemic is over, we’ll be tempted to overstuff our calendars again, just like a person who breaks a fast is tempted to eat a dozen doughnuts! But wise people will be more discerning about how they steward their time in 2021. How will you steward your time more wisely in this new year?

Lesson Two: *It’s OK to not be OK.* 2020 evoked a lot of feelings in us – frustration, fear, anger, isolation, even despair. And perhaps because we all experienced it together we became a bit more comfortable talking about those difficult feelings, rather than pretending that everything is OK when in fact it’s not. One aspect of the mental health crisis in America is the stigma against mental illness. And much of that stigma comes from a sense of shame that many of us feel when we don’t feel OK. But many of us also discovered that in 2020, the more we talked about our true feelings, the less shame we felt. Ecclesiastes 3:4 says that there is “a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance,” a reminder that every emotion is valid and matters. So, let’s keep talking about those feelings openly and shamelessly, for our own mental health, and the mental health of others. Is there something you need to tend to, a wound in your life, hard feelings that you’ve been resistant to address? How will you deal with it differently in this new year?

If you need someone to talk to, please call our Church Office. We’d be honored to walk alongside you to listen to you and get you connected to the resources you need.

Lesson Three: *The good old days weren’t all good.* They weren’t all good. 2020 opened our eyes to the magnitude of the racial divide in America. George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile and Michael Brown became household names and reminders that we still have a long way to go to live into Dr. Martin Luther King’s dream of a nation that judges people by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. Many of us read books, listened to podcasts and engaged in honest conversations that helped us to realize that racism isn’t just a problem “out there,” but a problem “in here.” And so we learned that if racial healing is going to happen, there is work to be done both “in here” and “out there.” Throughout the past year we talked a lot about wanting to “get back to the way things were,” but when it comes to racial equity in America we cannot afford to return to the way things were. The gap between God’s Kingdom on earth and God’s Kingdom in heaven is still wide.

How will you help to bring healing in this new year to the things that divide us... racially, politically, economically in our nation?

A group of disciples here at Prince of Peace are launching an initiative called POP for Justice. In just a few weeks we’ll be hearing more about that, and how you can be involved in combatting racism actively. You’ll find more information on our website. And that leads us to lesson number four.

Lesson Four: *Your voice matters.* 2020 taught us that every vote matters in this democracy. It taught us the power and the importance of words that convey kindness, compassion and love as opposed to words that demean, divide and destroy. And it reminded us of the prophetic calling of the Gospel, to speak out against oppression and injustice wherever it exists. The challenges that we faced in 2020, and continue to face now, are so big, so overwhelming, that we can too easily convince ourselves that we are powerless to make a difference. It’s so tempting to just throw up our hands in surrender. But we are not powerless. You have a voice, and your voice matters. Can you think of a time in the past few months when someone said just the right thing at just the right time? Perhaps it was a word of encouragement or an expression of care and compassion, or just a “hey, was just thinking about you.” If so, then you know exactly what I’m talking about. Words like that have always mattered, but never more than in the challenges we’ve faced in the past year. So how will you use your words, your voice to bring healing and encouragement to others in the new year?

Proverbs 18:21 puts it this way, “*Words kill, words give life; they’re either poison or fruit—you choose.*” (NLT) How will you steward your words more wisely in 2021?

Lesson Five: *Joy is a choice.* If you lived under the illusion that joy is a byproduct of your circumstances, then 2020 was a remarkably joyless year! So many people who shared the wisdom they gleaned from this past year said that they discovered that joy comes from within; joy is a choice. They practiced finding something to be grateful for, even on the most difficult days. And by practicing gratitude they experienced joy in the midst of great challenges. Others chose to focus on the needs of others...delivering meals, making caring phone calls, shopping for others’ groceries or just writing a note of encouragement... and through their service they experienced joy. Still others spent more time in nature, allowing the beauty of creation to remind them of the love and the presence of the

Creator who walks with us and weeps with us in tough times and breathes joy into us when we feel breathless. Choosing joy doesn't mean we deny or mask our pain. It is instead refusing to allow our pain to close our hearts to others and to the joy that is always available to us. How will you choose joy and allow it to redefine your outlook for 2021?

Friends, I'm glad 2020 is behind us, but I want to carry what we've learned into this new year; to live differently, to live wisely. There's just got to be some lemonade to be made out of this gigantic lemon of a year! And I want to challenge you to do the same. So how about this, spend some time this week reflecting on what you learned in 2020. Pick one lesson that you've learned and you're willing to live into in the new year. And then share it with a family member or friend. And if you already know what that lesson is, post it in the chat right now during this worship service so we can all learn from your wisdom. Friends, if we'll all do this, if we'll all reflect, learn and apply, in other words, if we'll all live more wisely then we'll be living into these words from the book of Proverbs that says,

⁹ *Then you will understand what is right, just, and fair,
and you will find the right way to go.*

¹⁰ *For wisdom will enter your heart,
and knowledge will fill you with joy.*

¹¹ *Wise choices will watch over you.
Understanding will keep you safe.*

Let's pray....