January 5, 2014 Norwalk

**Prayers of the People 010310**

Birthing, dreaming, imagining God, we give you thanks for the gift of this new day, just inside the threshold of this New Year. We give you thanks for all that prepared and preceded it – for experiences and learnings and relationships and memories – and for all that, by them, we can now imagine it to become. We have not, after all, finished learning, finished experiencing, finished making tomorrow’s memories, and so we pray for your Spirit’s animation and guidance in all that lies ahead. Strip from us the numbness that prevents us experiencing fully the life that pulses around us. Help us to laugh full from our bellies when surrounded by joy, and to weep deeply when jarred by grief. Help us to love passionately and to meet injustice with the cold anger of determined resistance.

We would be your people, fully awake and fully alive to all that you will introduce us in the days and months ahead. We feel it now in the joys and intercessions we have voiced aloud. We are grateful for…

And we add our prayers for…

Awake, then, and attuned we lean into the promises of this new year; and prayerful, attentive to the words your son taught us to pray, saying…

**TEXT: Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19**

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

***That the Eyes of Our Heart Might See***

I wrote in this week’s newsletter column that a New Year is like standing out on the front porch after a night’s worth of heavy snow -- a beautiful blanket, clean and white, stretching as far as the eye can see. No tires have cut and tracked its layers; no feet have left their prints. Heavy, but soft, sparkling and clean. But it is the fifth of the month and we are well aware that the sounds of activity are already stirring; this New Year won’t be virgin long. How will we use the days at hand, and what kind of tracks will we make? By the time this new year, too, melts away, will we have anything from it but a chill? Fresh and white and blanketing all that we see, what will we do with these days that are ours?

With those kinds of questions, it’s appropriate that we begin the New Year with a prayer. God knows that there are other ways to begin it. We can start it with a bleary-eyed hangover from too much partying New Year’s Eve -- which doesn’t set a very high tone for the days that are to follow. We can start it, as we did this week in accordance with my southern background, with black-eyed peas for good luck. We could start it with resolutions for the better ways we intend to live. But finally, such proclamations are concerned with those things that through will power we plan to do or stop doing or accomplish. To begin, on the other hand, with a prayer is to recognize up front the fact that there are certain things that, alone, we cannot do.

And so the writer to the Ephesians offers us a prayer, that we might attend to ***God’s*** investment in our days and ***God’s*** plans for the ways that we will live them. A prayer: that we might attend to other possibilities and resources than our own. “I pray,” the writer begins, “that God may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him. . .” Wisdom and revelation. It’s more than everyday practical savvy, and more than we might acquire from books; it’s more than the depth and perspective we pick up with age and more than rich experiences can teach.

The wisdom for which Paul is praying is that special capacity for spiritual discernment that grows in the very core of our lives that enables us to see and know the will of God. It is the ability to tune into God’s leading and to listen; which comes, Paul understands, not finally from hard religious work -- not finally from within us, but from beyond us. It is as William Barclay translates it, “the wisdom of the deep things of God.” And Paul prays that we might grow in our ability to know them. Help us, O God – in our working and our play; in our choosing and our spending; in the gritty stuff of our living – to better discern your will, and attend to the things you are telling us. Give us, O God, the spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know you better.

Jesus once observed that living is a matter of the heart -- that hearts can be found wherever the treasures of our lives are invested and at work. That observation is ultimately an invitation to let loose the blood hounds of our soul and track down -- sort out -- those investments and priorities and values to see what our lives have become. And that’s still important work. Every time I write a check; every time I say “yes” to a given commitment; every time I tap into my talents and choose one thing over another I ought to ask myself what that says about what I think is important.

But as important as that soul searching may be, it is only the beginning of the trail. Once we have found where our hearts really are, the second step is to move them closer to where God would have them to be. What is God’s will for your life? Who is God calling you to be? What is the discipleship to which God is calling you; the purpose God would have you choose? It’s a worthy prayer as this New Year still coos in its diaper. “God give us wisdom and perception that we might better know where to go.”

“Enlighten the eyes of our hearts,” Paul prays, for until we see ***there***, we really see nothing at all. “Grant our hearts better vision, O God, that we might know the hope to which we’ve been called.” Which is another good New Year’s word: hope. It’s not that it’s a new word. We lived with it all of December as we lit the Advent candles. “O come, O come Emmanuel,” we sang along with the Hebrew prophets. “Ransom captive Israel.” “Come thou long expected Jesus; come to set thy people free.” Advent is the season of hope.

We hear it mentioned and feel it vanishing over the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, in Africa, in Iraq and Afghanistan. We hope the fighting will end; we hope new and ancient adversaries will meet each other on different terms; we hope at home that the economy will continue to rebound and that companies will start hiring; and that loved ones will be safe as they travel, and heal from their ailments. We hope that the winter won’t be too unbearably cold, just as we hoped against summer’s flooding rains. We hope that the *Packers*, or the *Chiefs* or the *Vikings* or the *Bears* or whoever will make it to the Super Bowl, just as any decent Iowan hoped against hope that the Hawkeyes would win the Outback Bowl. We know what hope is all about. We do it all the time. The only problem is that, Biblically speaking, we don’t.

What we do is verbalize our wants -- we wish and we dream and we covet certain things, but such objectives bear little resemblance to hope. As we affirmed together last month in the flickering glow of a candle, hope has something to do with confidence and trust and positive expectation. Hope is the confident anticipation of that which we have reason to believe will eventually come to pass. A farmer plants his seeds and expects the harvest to come; a lender puts out money and expects it to be repaid. That is the essence of hope. More than desire or wishful thinking, Hope is the voice of expectation, and it is our calling to it that Paul prays for our hearts to see.

It’s an important thing to notice for a people preferring busyness and action and bottom-line results. We are called, not first of all “to a mission or to a work, or to a stewardship campaign, or even to a peace rally or whatever” (Brueggeman, *Proclamation 3*). We are called, first of all, to a hope that is not of our making. It is a hope that was conceived in the very heart of God before, Paul says, the world was even made. It is the hope that we be “holy and blameless in love” and live as the children by grace that we are. It is the hope that the world be filled with shalom -- God’s wholeness and fullness and peace. It is the hope that all creation’s purpose be fulfilled and not wasted or squandered or left somehow unused. It is the hope that God and creation might be intimately one in activity, in destiny, and in love. Less a blueprint for our everyday living and the choices we will make, than it is the framework, the context, the vision within which we will. It is first of all the hope -- the expectation -- of God, but one that we are called to see and to share and allow to form our days.

But as critical as it is for our hearts to see that much, there is more to be seen than hope. More than simply the vision of that kingdom still distant, enlightened hearts can see the power at hand to draw it near and the riches inherited when it is. Enlightened hearts can see not simply the expectant coming of it all, but the goodness and the rightness of it as well. Ah, that in this New Year our hearts might so clearly be able to see. Would that our personal chaos be so ordered and our random scenes be so framed. Would that our appetites be so whetted and our purposes be so joyfully aimed.

Would that our gathered lives as church this year might, through wisdom and revelation, see no less of the same. Yes, for as important as it is that we individually hear Paul’s prayer, it was the church that was on his mind; the church’s heart that can grow so easily tepid and blind. What vision will guide this ministry and on what power will we draw? There is an inheritance far richer than that of our own making, and with the wisdom born of attentive faith we will not simply see it, but taste it.

There is a fresh blanket of days new fallen around us, and there are tracks that will inevitably be made. There are choices to be made and resources to be invested, and a hope to which we are called. God, draw us close and give us wisdom of the spirit; let us live to know you better. There’s a hope to which we are called and power to move toward its riches. Fill us, that the eyes of our hearts might see.