

“Blessed Are Those Who Mourn”

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Micah 6:1-8

Matthew 5:1-12

Happy New Year! And welcome to the Year of the Horse! If you are turning 12, 24, 36, 48, 60, 72, 84 or 96 between January 31st and next winter's Lunar New Year, you were born in the Year of the Horse. Do we have any horse people here today? People who were born in the Year of the Horse are said to be open-minded, optimistic and out-going. Although they sometimes talk too much and can be stubborn, they are perceptive, talented and down to earth.

I was *not* born in the Year of the Horse, but I am a horse person... or at least I used to be. I spent half my childhood galloping around the back yard. And when my father built a barn and we got a real horse, I practically moved into the barn, to be with and serve my new animal friend. I stopped riding horses after college when I moved into Manhattan, because it was too expensive. But when I turned 40, my sisters bought me 10 riding lessons at Overpeck Stables. I remember driving past this church on my way to the stable, noticing the sign, and wondering what kind of people were members here. That was over 20 years ago.

According to the lunar calendar, the Year of the Horse officially started last Friday, January 31st. Many of us are especially glad to begin a new year. I'm hoping that last Thursday will be the end of a rough year at our church. Our former music director, Linda Lanier Keosaian, died last winter, and then last Thursday our beloved long-time member, Pamela Lovell passed away. On top of that, we had two horrible tragedies.

In November we were devastated to learn that one of our beloved teenagers died suddenly of a heart problem no one was aware of. Things were starting to get back to normal when again, last Thursday, another beloved long-time friend of our church, Harriette Coleman's house burned down, killing her 65 year old daughter Harriette, and her 34 year old granddaughter Ruthie. The house is demolished, and everything they owned destroyed. We have a funeral for Pamela this afternoon at 4, even while we are collecting clothing, food and money for Harriette and her family. So I pray for a new year, with a break from tragedy and grief.

Now they say it's bad luck to mention illness or death during a Lunar New Year celebration. But to ignore such fresh wounds for the sake of superstition would be callous. This is reality in our church family right now, and we need to talk about it. Still, there's something in each of us that wants to be superstitious, that wants to think if we just keep quiet about something, if we just follow the right rituals, bad fortune won't follow us into a new year.

A superstition is based on the idea that people can influence their fate one way or the other, by doing or not doing certain things, for example, wearing lucky colors, or saying words to bring good luck. I was reading about some Seahawk fan superstitions yesterday. There are a lot of funny ones. In one Seahawk fan club, a toy Santa wearing Seahawk gear *has to* face the fans at all times. These fans say they know it's true because in the January 11th game, the Seahawk Santa had been bumped and was facing the back corner, and when someone turned it to face the crowd again, the team suddenly got a first down. So there you have it. Something you can do to bring good luck. Right?

Christians do believe there is an element of chance or luck to life. The book of Ecclesiastes says (9:11) “Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all.” The fastest people don’t always win the race, and the strongest don’t always win the battle. Not everyone gets what they deserve, at least on this earth. Sometimes bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to people who did nothing to earn or deserve it.

This is a wise and important lesson to learn. We shouldn’t blame ourselves if we have bad luck. Sometimes bad things just happen. And as Christians, we don’t believe good things happen because someone is wearing red, or eats lucky foods. Besides, Jesus never promised good fortune. Instead he promised persecution and hardship, as Maurice read from the Sermon on the Mount this morning. Whether or not good things happen, what’s important is whether our hearts are right with God.

Rather than look for ways to get lucky in the new year, we should seek God’s blessing. Good times and bad times will come and go. What we want is to be with God no matter what happens.

In American culture we often think of blessings as good things that happen to us. To “count your blessings” means to list all the good things in your life. And we might say “I am blessed to have my own home and a good job and a wonderful family.” Or “I’ve been blessed with good health.” We use the word “blessed” to mean fortunate. But there’s a difference between good fortune and being blessed, at least in the way Jesus used the word.

In the scripture Maurice read today, Jesus pronounced blessing on the poor and downtrodden. The blessing is not because being poor or downtrodden is a good thing. We are blessed because God’s favor is with us. We may feel miserable now, but we are not forgotten. The story is not over yet. God sees, and God is with us. And in God’s kingdom everything will be reversed. Humility, meekness, sorrow, and inner poverty are not normally things anyone would seek after. But in the Kingdom of God, those who have these qualities will be honored and blessed. It doesn’t necessarily mean they are good people. It simply means that God cares.

Jesus said, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are those who have been denied their fair share on this earth, blessed are those who are the victims of unrighteousness. Jesus promises that our grief now is not the final word. For those who are sorry, there is forgiveness. For those who grieve loss, there is comfort. For those who are oppressed, there will be justice.

In God’s kingdom, it’s not wealth and good fortune, it’s not popularity or success that are important, but rather God’s presence and favor. And God also blesses those who communicate that presence and favor to others, those who show mercy, those who are pure in heart (meaning sincere, or free of mixed motives), those who are peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for doing what is right.

We can enjoy playful superstitions as we gallop into a new year: eat lucky food after the service, and wear lucky clothes to watch the super bowl tonight. But know that true comfort, true satisfaction, true peace, comes from God with us, even in the midst of sadness and grief.

May we know God’s presence with us today, and in the year to come. Amen.