

## NEW YEAR'S EVE

### 1 Peter 1:22-25

If you want to make God laugh...

Every New Year's something I heard my vicar year bounces around my head again. There was a story on TV about a firemen's chaplain who died on 9/11. As they were interviewing the men he served, one particular thing he used to tell the guys kept getting brought up over and over again: "If you want to make God laugh, tell Him what you're doing tomorrow."

It's true, you know. We are not promised tomorrow. Death in any of its unsuspected forms could be only a breath away. Tomorrow may be on the calendar, but the calendar records notes, it doesn't give promises. "If you want to make God laugh, tell Him what you're doing tomorrow."

I know it is going to sound a bit odd, but I love cemeteries. I hope to move into one someday. Walking through a cemetery on a nice crisp day always makes me feel more alive. Ironic, huh? But cemeteries preach without saying a word, reminding us there's always a tombstone hovering over our heads.

About a month ago, one of the Detroit papers did a story on a pastor who had just passed away. Every morning, he'd wake up and go to his gravesite to read. He had purchased the plot years earlier, and turned it into a study and devotional area of sorts. I like the idea. I just need to buy a plot.

Whenever we begin a new year, our first inclination is to look forward to new beginnings. That is meet and right, but we shouldn't miss the end in the new beginnings. Every new year is another wrinkle, another gray hair, another prescription, a year closer to the cemetery. Like a person on a car ride, we do right to enjoy the sights and stops along the way, but we ought not ever forget our final destination.

Should all this make us morbid, keep us locked up in fear, distracted from our daily duties and responsibilities? No, this is all the more reason for us to live. One day, someone asked Luther, "Father Luther, what would you do if you knew you were going to die tomorrow." Luther replied, "I'd plant a tree."

With a keen awareness of our mortality comes keen perspective, clarity of thought. St. Augustine pointed out, "Time never takes time off." Why not love your children all the more when you know your time is limited? Why not reconcile with your spouse all the sooner after an argument when you know your time is limited? Why not labor in your vocation all the more faithfully when you know your time to serve others through it is limited? Why not take care of yourself all the more carefully to enjoy life all the more fully when you know your time in this earthen temple of the Holy Spirit is limited? Why not hear the Word and receive the Sacrament all the more regularly when you know your time to prepare for the eternal tomorrow is limited? The cemetery ought to instill in us, not fear, but joy and determination. For the Christian, the cemetery speaks the words of Goethe, "Life is the childhood of our immortality." And childhood is to be treasured.

St. Peter writes, "And this word is the good news that was preached to you." What is the good news? "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever." The good news is that we will wither and fall, but the word of the Lord will not, and we have the word of the Lord, which promises that what is planted in our plot perishable will be raised imperishable. "You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God," St. Peter assures us, and we will receive that imperishable seed in our Lord's imperishable Body and Blood again tonight.

I once read a story of a missionary who served in India and was returning home on furlough. He brought some Indian food, called chutney. The man sitting next to him saw the food and asked about it. He asked to try some, and took a bunch, enjoying the initial taste. But there's something about Indian food that most people don't realize. It takes a moment before the spices stomp on your tongue. The man's eyes began to well with tears as his face turned red. "You said you were a missionary, right?" "Yes," the missionary replied. "So you believe in the fires of hell?" "Yes," the missionary replied. "Well, you're the first missionary I've met who carried around samples."

We've all had samples this past year. We've taken bites of the chutney of this world just to have the spices stomp on our tongue, as guilt wells our eyes and churns our stomach. Let's not merely choke on those samples, but learn from them. Sin's deceptive delicacies may taste wonderful at first, but they redden the face.

"If you want to make God laugh, tell Him what you're doing tomorrow." Like children with only a day at the amusement park, let us make the most of the time we have, serving our God, serving our neighbor, drinking deeply of the waters of life and feasting on the Bread heaven serves with it. Spend some time in the cemetery, so to speak, not to demoralize, but to invigorate, because with a keen awareness of our mortality comes keen perspective, clarity of thought.

A tombstone hung over our Lord's head too, but it did not deter Him. It spurred Him on. Let it do the same for us. With Christ and by His cross, when your time is up, it won't be lost, for when your plot is full the story is just beginning. There will be no time to fret about how you're going to go as you rejoice over where you're going to go. That's the good news that turns the golden years of our mortality into the childhood of our immortality. "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever. And this word is the good news that was preached to you." Amen.