Sermon For New Year’s Day

Text: Exodus 33:13
The Lord said, "I will go with you and give you peace."

God with Us in 2011

Have you ever wondered what it was like for those early American explorers as they set out on their journeys to explore and discover the uncharted parts of our country? They left behind the comfort and security of the old country and set out on a journey into the unknown. Thoughts like –

Would they see their loved ones again?

What kind of dangers were they heading into?

Were they ready for the harshness of the country they were about to cross?

What would be the reaction of the Native American people be to seeing white strangers crossing their land?
We know that some those early settlers faced extreme conditions especially as they crossed the United States, some were unprepared for what they had to face, some lost their lives as they made their way through unknown and unexpected territory.

In a way we are like those early pioneers and explorers. Today we are launching out into completely new and unknown territory as we begin this New Year 2011.

Nobody has ever been this way before. We haven't had a 2011 before.

There are no maps to consult - not even any reports from previous travelers for us to study. Every journey into the unknown is unique and different.

There are diaries and maps of previous journeys into a new year but none that can give us a precise description of where we are heading in 2011.

We can't even climb a mountain or a high tree to see what it's like ahead. So we must go one step at a time - one day at a time - trusting in God to lead us along the way that we should be going.

You don't have to look too hard or too long to see the sad events of the past - and there were many sad things and tragedies last year. It's easy to look back and remember many of the tragedies of 2010 because they were so much in the news:

a. The hurricanes that struck with such devastation and death,

b. The destruction caused by an earthquake in Haiti,
ongoing war in Iraq and Afghanistan,

c. Renewed famine in central Africa where there has been a terrible loss of life among the young and the elderly,

d. The continued bad economy

e. At to that the abuse and violence perpetrated in our country reported daily in our newspapers.

f. There have been acts of terrorism, robberies rape and murder,

g. The diseases and death that struck our families.

h. There are also the many personal hurts and pains and heartaches. These didn't make the headlines of the paper, nor the television news. You may still be suffering and that in it may make you wonder what the New Year brings for you.

It could be that the illness and the pain you experienced in 2010 is still with you as you begin 2011 – it may happen that things will get worse.

You know that you will still have to face the same temptations;

Your inability to cope with things,

a. The feeling of loss after the death of someone you have been close to,

b. Your hurt because of what someone has said or
done to you,

c. Your distress over a member of your family that has gone down the wrong road,

These will follow you into the New Year.

When the hands of clock pointed to midnight and the New Year celebrations went into full swing, for a moment people forget the problems of the old year and look forward to new beginnings and hope for a brighter future.

But we all know from experience that as the first day of the year dawns we have the same difficulties and problems that we had yesterday in 2010. That leaves us with little to really celebrate.

In spite of all the old problems and any new ones that we will encounter in 2011, we can go ahead confidently. God will help each of us weather the storms of the coming year. In the book of Exodus we find Moses speaking to God, "You have said that you are my friend and that you are pleased with me. If this is true, let me know what your plans are, then I can obey and continue to please you. And don't forget that you have chosen this nation to be your own." The Lord said, "I will go with you and give you peace."

Moses was looking ahead to the future and what he saw looked very bleak indeed. He was leading the people of Israel through the wilderness. God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt but while Moses was on Mt Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments from the hand of God, the people were playing up down below. They made a calf of gold and then worshipped it.
Instead of giving praise and honor and glory to their loving God, they were bowing to a useless idol. We are told God wanted to destroy them for their disloyalty. But Moses pleaded with God. He prayed for the people and God heard him. He assured him of his mercy even though they didn't deserve it. Then Moses wanted God to give the assurance that he would always be close to his people.

So God gave the assurance that Moses wanted. He promised that he would be with them always and that he would eventually give them rest in the Promised Land.

You know, we can look on these words as God's wonderful promise to all his people - to his church of all ages. The promise stands: My presence will go with you, and I will give rest. That's just the kind of reassurance we need as we step off into the New Year. We can explore 2011 knowing that God has promised that he will not leave us or forsake us. He will be with us.

We can be sure that no matter what may eventuate in 2011 God will be with us. No matter what may happen to us, we can always be guaranteed the rest and peace that the angels spoke of at Christmas. Come what may in the year ahead, a personal disaster, a business crisis, a failure of health, national turmoil, or natural catastrophe, God's presence will always go with us and God will give us rest. Heaven and earth may be destroyed, but God will not forsake those whom he loves and has died for. That is great news for the beginning of a new year. My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.

Have you, by any chance, wondered why God has allowed you to enter 2011? What purpose he has for you?
What does God want you to do in 2011?

Each of us needs to search our own hearts to discover what life's purpose for each of us is.

For parents, 2011 will provide opportunities for us to improve in the ways we communicate and care for our families.

For children, this year will give us time to love and respect our parents as never before.

For employees and employers 2011 will provide opportunities to co-operate, care, use skills and abilities that God has given.

For members of a congregation, this New Year will provide occasions for us to be more involved in God's work through their congregation and to participate in the ministry that God has given in the community.

If we are sick or have an accident, this New Year will provide an opportunity to grow closer to God, to look to him for strength and comfort.

If you are at odds with someone, 2011 will provide a time for you to seek reconciliation and to restore harmony between you and the other.

Because we belong to Christ through our baptism, the New Year has been given to us to plan ahead and to resolve to do better the tasks God has given us to do before our time on this planet ends. This may be the last time we enter a new year before we enter our eternal home in heaven. Who knows what God has in store for us 2011?
The Bible advises us in so many different ways to count our days. “My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle,... as a cloud vanishes and is gone. We are all born weak and helpless. All lead the same short, troubled life. We grow and wither as quickly as flowers; we disappear like shadows”.

As we change the calendar in our homes and put up the new one for 2011 we are reminded how quickly time passes.

We are reminded that every hour and day of the New Year is a gift from God to be used to give glory to God and to bring goodness and love into the people in our lives.

The New Year reminds us that whatever happens in the year ahead we have a God who promises, "Be confident! I'm here. I will stick with you! My presence will go with you and I will give you rest. Jesus himself has promised: I'll be with you always".

Just a week ago we celebrated Christmas. Our past with all of its failures and our future, our New Year is tied up with this child of Bethlehem. He is our Savior. He is Immanuel – which means God is with us. Just that fact throws a whole different light on the future and on our relationships with one another.

We can have confidence in the future because we have a God who loves us and takes a deeply personal and intimate concern in our daily lives.

We have a God who forgives those times of the year we would rather they not have happened at all.

He is able to heal those horrible moments in our lives.
He is a God who supports and guides us as we seek to do what is the right thing - we want to be good parents, we want to be loving children; we want to be involved in the worship and ministry of our congregation and in these endeavors we are sure of his help and strength. No matter what - God is with us.

The same merciful, loving God who says to us, "You are forgiven; I have wiped away the sins of 2010", also says to us as we enter 2011: "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest!"