

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Strength and Courage in the New Year”

Rev. David K. Groth
New Year’s Eve, 2020

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Josh. 1:9).

A year ago, at this time, each of us was wondering what the New Year would look like. No one anticipated the challenges we would face. Not you and me, not the government, nor any one of the palm readers or star gazers in all the world.

The Lord knew what was coming, but he wasn’t telling anyone. That’s a good thing too because if we knew what the future was bringing, we might not have the courage to face it.

On Tuesday, Jason Gay wrote, “We’ve got a day or two left in 2020, but I’m ready to close out the tab and call it a year. How about you?” A big part of me has one foot out the door already, but first there’s something we have to do. It was a difficult year, but here we are. God took care of us. He got us through it. It’s time we return thanks to him.

In Deuteronomy 29, the Lord says, “During the forty years that I led you through the desert, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet.” He acknowledges the hardships, “You ate no bread [other than the manna he provided] and drank no wine . . .” Then He tells them why he kept them in the desert, “I did this so that you might know that I am the LORD your God” (v. 5-6). He was teaching them to trust solely in Him.

2020 has reminded this generation that He is the Lord our God. We are completely dependent on Him, just as His people in the desert were. 2020 could have been a lot worse, on every front . . .but your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet. The supplies in your pantry and refrigerator have held up (and if they haven’t, I want you to talk to me after the service). There are reasons for optimism in 2021 and I don’t have to spell them out. However, I do want to say that pinning our hopes on pharmaceutical companies or the government to dig us out of this mess would be a mistake. That would be putting our trust in man rather than God. Psalm 146 cautions us on the matter: “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans perish. Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God.”

Earlier this month Chuck Yeager died. He was the first man to fly at supersonic speeds, faster than the speed of sound. George Smith was the first man to survive ejection from an aircraft in supersonic flight. On the morning of February 26, 1955, Smith had to bail out of a jet going almost 800 miles an hour. Can you imagine? The ferocious windblast stripped him of his helmet, oxygen mask, footwear, flight gloves, wristwatch, even his ring. He survived the ordeal but spent seven months in the hospital. And there were mental scars too. From that day on, Smith had a terrible fear of flying. He could not get into the cockpit of another plane without being seized by fear. He sought professional help from physicians and counselors, but nothing seemed to work, nothing until a hospital nurse gave him something to think about. She said,

“Courage is knowing the worst and discovering that – when Jesus is with you – the very worst the world can dish out cannot hurt you – not really, or permanently.” Smith latched on to those words and started living his life again.

You and I would do well remember those words too. When Jesus is with you, the very worst the world can dish out cannot hurt you – not really or permanently.

Those words reflect the teaching of Scripture. It’s right there in the ancient text from Joshua chapter 1: *“Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”*

We can be strong and courageous moving into 2021, not because we know the future, but because we know who will be in the future. “The LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

We can be strong and courageous moving into 2021 not because we know how to dig deeper and find strength and resilience we never knew we had, but because we know “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:11).

We can be strong and courageous on the eve of a new year because Jesus died on a cross for us and has reconciled us to the Father. He has said to us, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (Jn 14:27).

We can be strong and courageous in 2021 not because we are certain it’s going to be so much better. We don’t know that. But we do know and can be certain of the Lord’s salvation through Christ. “I give them eternal life” he says of us His people “and they shall never perish. No one can snatch them out of my hand” (Jn 10:28-30).

We can be strong and courageous because we know “all things will work for the good for those who love God” (Rom. 8:28).

Strong and courageous because we know He’s coming soon. This life is not what he intends for us. He has something far better in mind.

Strong and courageous, because He’s very near us with His rod to protect us from evil and his staff to guide us.

Strong and courageous, because “the dwelling place of God is with man” (Rev. 21:3).

Strong and courageous because Christ has died. Christ is risen. And Christ will come again.

What will 2021 be like? Who knows? The Lord knows, but again He’s not telling anyone. It’s enough for us to know He’ll be there. One way or another, He’ll see us through. *“Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go”* (Josh. 1:9). Amen.