

*Looking Forward to the One-der Years!*

*Romans 1:16, 5:1-5, 12:1-2*

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On Thursday night we said goodbye to the “00s,” (the oughts). Ten years ago, we didn’t know what to call the decade that began with year 2000. Calling it the “oughts” didn’t seem right, even though two “0”s can be pronounced “ought,” as in “James Bond, 007.” But as the decade ended, “oughts” seemed like the right name, because culturally, it was a decade of regrets. Lots of things people ought to have done...ought not to have done!

How nice to say “Hello One-der years!” That’s the title that an Australian, Adam Vujic, used to win news.com’s “name-the-decade competition” ...we’ll see if it sticks. I like it. But not because of “The Wonder Years” TV program, that coming-of-age sit-com set in the early 1960s!

The coming One-der years won’t be a return to the past, change will continue and at a faster pace. This decade can become the One-der years as Christ-followers discover the wonderful transforming power of the Gospel, in post-Christian culture. And our personal transformation will give hope to others. “Wonder” motivates people far more than “ought.”

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome, Christians comprised a tiny percentage of a decadent, pagan culture. Yet Paul had such confidence in the power of the message of Jesus Christ. In 1:16 he summarized his letter by writing...

*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.*

Dispute his culture’s injustice and debauchery, despite the ever-present idolatry, Paul understood that the news of Jesus was powerful. He envisioned Jews and pagans welcoming grace and receiving eternal life. We can have that confidence also.

Romans is an in-depth study of how God has brought about this new life. It’s a challenging book, but in places Paul comes up for air and celebrates the impact of this Gospel of grace. Look at 5:1 with me:

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*

This is incredible stuff! The relationship we have with God by trusting in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ brings us peace, even as the turbulence of change buffets us. Even when we suffer, the powerful presence of God’s Holy Spirit takes that suffering and produces perseverance, character, and hope. That’s why no matter what happens with western culture, this next decade can be One-der years for you, if you are in Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, God pours out His love into your heart. While circumstances may disappoint, what God does within you will inspire. The wonder of it all is that God can use past and future difficulties to give you inner peace, amazing perseverance, life-blessing character, and infectious hope.

God is ready and able to transform you; the question is whether we are willing to be transformed. After 11 chapters of celebrating what God can and will do for people, Paul laid out the issue that constantly faces Christ-followers. It's the scripture printed on your note page:

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.*

God will not force your transformation. His Holy Spirit dwells within Christians, yet that Spirit moves in concert with your willingness to change. At issue are two acts of your will. The first is to *offer our bodies as living sacrifices*. Our primary way to respond to God's grace to declare that "this body...my life...my existence is to honor and please You." And this attitude must be embraced every year, every week, every day. As Rick Warren says, "the problem with a living sacrifice is that it can crawl off the altar." Some of us crawled off the altar this past year. Today we can renew our commitment to live for Christ.

You'll notice that there's a lot of "white space" in the sermon notes. During the Communion Service you may want to record some of the ways you are going to offer yourself as a living sacrifice to the Lord. Perhaps Trinity's Community Impact week and the Outflow study will help you learn to worship God in everyday life.

The other ingredient necessary for transformation has to do with your relationship to the culture. In verse 2 Paul wrote,

*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

Our world isn't all bad. There is much to celebrate and learn from non-Christians. But *don't be conformed to the pattern of this world*. Aspire to be in this world—to enjoy the people of this world—without being limited by their limits. Aspire to develop a mind, an attitude, an awareness of what is true and beautiful, in order to honor God and bless people.

In this New Year try to develop those habits that will renew your mind and increase your spiritual awareness. Don't make a long list, but on your note page, make notes about how you will resume your Quiet Time, strengthen your prayer life, and strive for great relationships.

I had a big birthday over the holidays...one that makes you realize that every day needs to count. I got many neat presents; one of them was this handsome journal. Writing out some of my prayers and reflecting on my journey has been and will be a way that God renews my mind, so I will not be conformed to this world, instead that I will be transformed, one who can test and demonstrate His will to others.

Increasingly it is my passion (beyond serving and building up a great church) to be a person who conveys the grace and truth of Jesus in the way that he relates to his family, his friends, and his neighbors. Recently I saw such a powerful example of how a counter-cultural person can change others. I'm talking about the new movie, "Invictus," which shows the impact that President Nelson Mandela had on Francois Pienaar, the captain of the South African Rugby Team.

Back in the 1990s, a series of amazing events happen that brought an end to apartheid, the un-equal separation of the races in South Africa. After being freed from 27 years of imprisonment, Nelson Mandela—played very convincingly by Morgan Freeman—was elected president in the first election that

allowed blacks to vote. Of course, many blacks wanted to eliminate all the reminders of white oppression, including the Springboks, the national rugby team. But President Mandela, wanting South Africa to become a "rainbow nation," insisted on keeping the hated Springboks. Since the country was already scheduled to host the 1995 World Cup, he brought the team captain, Francois Pienaar to his office for tea, to encourage him as a leader. The gentle gracious manner of President Mandela had a powerful impact on Francois, played by Matt Damon. A pivotal moment came when he visited Mandela's former prison cell on Robben Island, and realized the depth of Mandela's forgiveness of white South Africans.

Knowing Mandela had affected the rugby captain. He rallied his team to play above expectations, and challenged them to hold clinics in black townships. A mediocre team not only won the World Cup, but in the process united black and white South Africans. All because God used 27 years of confinement to transform a freedom fighter into reconciler with a servant's heart.

I'm at the point in my life where I realize that I'm never going to be famous like Nelson Mandela or Francois Pienaar. But more than ever, I believe that today, tomorrow, and throughout these One-der years God can transform me into a fountain of grace.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, I urge you to present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is your truest form of worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may test and demonstrate God' good, pleasing, and perfect will!