

Sermon Bethlehem Symbol of Hope

May the words from my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. Grace and peace be with you on this day.

The last day of the year lends itself as a contemplative moment in our hurried and busy lives. It's a day to look at the list of famous people who died in 2023 and marvel about their contributions to humanity. I'm thinking about Tina Turner and Rosalynn Carter. It's a day when a few people sing a very peculiar song, "Auld Lang Syne," and many others pretend to know the lyrics.

More importantly, it's a natural day to practice some introspective skills and ask, "What did I learn?" while also looking forward to ask, "What do I hope for?" It's from such contemplative questions that people develop New Year's resolutions.

For those of you who may not know me well, I have a natural inclination for introspective contemplation. It's one of those traits that most pastors tend to have, with a few exceptions. And 2023 was one of those years when I spent more time in self-analysis than usual. To help with the introspective questions, I decided to re-read several books to re-learn the lessons within them.

In the course of 2023, I found myself perusing my bookshelves for works that I deemed worth keeping, hoping to find lessons in them. Still in my bookshelves were two books: Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. "Letters from a Birmingham Jail,"

and Dr. James Carse's book "Finite and Infinite Games" about organizational psychology. I found these two books to be invaluable in reframing my daily approach to the year we just lived.

Dr. Carse divides humanity into two categories: finite and infinite, and states that we are people who are either involved in finite goals and think in finite terms, or we are reaching for infinite goals and think with infinite images.

We have finite games, like soccer, football or basketball. These games have rules. They have a starting time and an end time. The clock is in control because at end of the game there is a winner and a loser. Someone may plead for more time, arguing that if they only had five more minutes they would win, but that's not how it works. A finite player is playing to win.

Whereas an infinite player is playing to keep the game alive. The clock is not in charge. There are no winners and there are no losers, only goals achieved. If the goal is not met, the infinite player is still in the game and just has to try again.

Russia and Ukraine are playing a game. The difference is that Russia is a finite player and Ukraine an infinite one. Vladimir Putin wants to declare victory by annexing land. Ukrainians are in the struggle for however long it takes. The United States are spectators in this struggle, but we have a finite mindset determined by how much money we will give. Our funds have a limit, and when we reach that limit, we'll turn our back and stop rooting for a winner.

The concept of time is interpreted differently by finite and infinite players. Finite players like to divide time into periods and declare winners and losers for each era. It's very theatrical. Each period of time is like a scene with its own opening and closing of the curtains. They see time as something that can be lost.

Infinite players interpret time as something generated. We say things like, "I'll make time for you." Time does not pass for an infinite player. Each moment of time is a new beginning. There is no such thing as an hour of time. There is an hour of love, or a day of grieving, or a season of learning, or a year of labor. Instead of stating how much has been completed in their work, they acknowledge that much still remains to be done.

A young woman, on her 18th birthday, took a trip to the west coast and told her parents she would be back in six weeks. The parents waved at her, as she pulled out of the driveway in her Chevy Caprice. It was a moment in time where the finite and infinite were intersecting. Her parents were full of finite expectations, and the young woman was bursting with infinite possibilities. As you might expect, the young woman did not return six weeks later. She made a new life in the west coast, at the disappointment of her parents who were holding on to her eventual return.

The infinite player knows how to let go. The finite player holds on.

The infinite player knows that time is a construct. Today, the 31st day of the 12th month two thousand and twenty-three years of the common era is a construct of

finite thinking. Much of the language used tonight, as we watch the ball on Time's Square descend, will be finite at its core.

Yet, time for the Christian church, is no longer relevant. Our new year begins with the first Sunday of Advent and notice that our language on that day is all about the hope tomorrow brings. The Christian Church is a prime example of infinite thinking. No pastor plants a church thinking of time. Churches are planted for longevity, to endure through the generations. And yet, too often, it is finite thinking that determines if they are successful. The success of a worship service is often measured in the number of people who attended. The success of a pastor is often measure in the amount of money he is able to raise. And yet, neither attendance nor monetary funds will determine how close we walk to God.

Christian theology is full of infinite thinking and imagery, Easter being the ultimate image to break us away from finite limitations. Death is not the end. It is a new beginning. The same goes for birth. It is through a child's birth that we realize something larger is at work, a mystery that connects us with the Divine.

When the church celebrates the birth of Jesus, on Christmas Eve, we read from the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." We refer to a village from long ago, Bethlehem, as a symbol of hope for us today. Why? Because what happened in that village 2000 years ago has an impact on life today. It offers a glimpse of the infinite.

PAUSE

Another infinite player I want to reference is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

His “I have a dream” speech as well as the “I have seen the mountain top” speech are full of infinite images. He used hope as the vehicle for his strategy. He described the work of fighting injustice and racism in metaphors that transcend all limitations. It is the type of work that will lead a nation to judge children by their character and not the color of their skin. It is work that will lead people to realize and I quote: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” End quote.

Dr. King sought to teach a new concept of community, one that is not bound by the laws of finite limitations. We are tied up in an infinite network of mutuality. The behavior of one person affects the whole community.

The year was 1902, just a few days before Christmas Eve when early settlers, Doc Roberts and Hotel owner George Lizotte, invited families from Disston City (now Gulfport) to join them in Pass-a-Grille for a Christmas celebration. By mid-morning Christmas Eve, a stately pine tree, fresh cut from neighboring Cabbage Key (now Tierra Verde) stood adorned with shimmering glass bells, tinsel garland, and candles of all hues of the rainbow. It was Pass-a-Grille’s first Christmas tree.

In 1910, a year before Pass-a-Grille was incorporated, a small group gathered around a Christmas tree in the schoolhouse. That was the unofficial beginning of our church. Funds were raised in 1913 to buy property and build a church,

dedicated on Christmas Eve four years later. Those early settlers and church founders understood infinite thinking. Their vision for a church on this island was not bound to the limitations of finite rules. It was the hope and promise of infinite possibilities that led them to establish this church.

The Apostle Paul, another infinite player, understood the endless possibilities of a faithful, worshiping community. In his letter to the Colossians, he described the virtues we must adopt in our Christian living. "Clothes yourselves with love," he wrote. Why love? Because love is eternal. It has no boundaries. We can feel the love of our spouses long after they have passed. Love transforms and transcends, because it has no beginning and no end. Love, like God, is infinite.

On this last day of the 12th month in the year two thousand twenty-three of the common era, we sit at the intersection between the limitations of the finite and the possibilities of the infinite. What limitations are you holding on to? What language constrains your thinking?

In this new year, 2024, realize the eternal is within our reach through the Spirit of the Living God. Become part of the church not because we can measure the work before us in finite terms, but because through Christ, the work of the church yields infinite fruit for an immeasurable and unknowable time.

This is the meaning of Christmas, to see the birth of the Christ Child as a new beginning in a long journey of all that is possible. Amen.