

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
New Year's Eve  
December 31, 2023  
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz  
***Denial, Despair, or Joy?***

—Psalm 90

Psalm 90 is included in Holy Scripture with the heading, “A prayer of Moses the man of God.” Moses the author of the Psalm prayed these words from experience. As he led the Children of Israel out of captivity in Egypt up toward the Promised land, the Children of Israel rebelled against God. As a consequence for their rebellion God said that no one over the age of twenty would enter the Promised Land. Israel would wander in the wilderness for forty years, until that entire generation perished in the desert. And so it was. For forty years Moses watched as one by one the people died. It is no wonder Moses prayed, “You turn men back to dust, saying, ‘Return to dust, O children of men!’ We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan.”

Tonight we turn the calendar to a New Year. That means many things. It means each of us is one year older than last year. For some of us it means that loved ones who were with us last year are with us no longer. Hopefully it means we are one year wiser than last year—although that’s not always the case! The bottom line is that a New Year is upon us, and it’s a good time for serious reflection about the brevity of our time on earth and the vast immensity of eternity.

So with what attitude will you enter 2024? I’ll give you three options to consider.

Option number one: you’re one year older, you have one year less left on earth, you are one year closer to whatever you’re looking forward to—graduation, marriage, anniversary, retirement—and you are one year closer to death. So enter 2024 in denial. That’s right, enter the New Year without any reflection at all, completely oblivious to the fact that your life is speeding away like a blur. Make the New Year a party. Go out and get so drunk or so high that you completely forget about anything serious in life. Don’t think about eternity. Don’t think about God. Don’t think about having to answer to God for your deeds. Just focus on the *now*. Live for the moment. Eat, drink, party, be merry! Live it up! That’s denial.

That’s the way so many people on earth today are going through life—denial. (There’s a reason for it, which I’ll get to in a moment.) Most people don’t want to think about serious things. They don’t want to reflect on their relationship with God, worshiping God, learning about God, knowing their Savior Jesus Christ. Because, well, it’s better just not to think about such things. So tonight on New Year’s Eve we’ll have a big, boozy party. We’ll kiss that special someone at midnight. We’ll celebrate how much money we’ve made in 2023 or how successful we’ve been in 2023 or maybe just the fact that we made it through 2023 and lived to see another year. But asking God to “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom,” is hardly on the radar.

Maybe you think I’m talking about your unchurched neighbor or coworker, but there’s a part of you and me that lives in denial. Be honest: why don’t you have a will drawn up? Is it because you don’t care about your loved ones, and you want to make things difficult for them when they have to settle your estate? Is it because you’ve just never gotten around to it? Or is it because you’re feeling good, you’re young and vibrant, and the day of your death is a long way off, and you don’t want to think about such things? Denial! I often wonder why more of our congregation members don’t fill out the form we keep in the church office for planning our own funeral. If you choose the special hymns you want sung and the Scripture readings you want read it’s a tremendous blessing to your family. Maybe you didn’t know it was an option. Maybe you don’t want to think about your funeral. Maybe you think you’re immortal. Maybe it’s denial. Yes, even we Christians struggle to think seriously about the shortness of our time on earth and to think seriously about eternity. Let’s repent of our failure to take seriously the care of our souls. (And if you have your will in place and your funeral already planned, then you can join me in repenting of the sin of pride because you’ve got it all together!)

I said a moment ago that there’s a reason so many people go through life in denial and refuse to think of eternal things. If a person doesn’t know God’s forgiveness in his Son Jesus Christ, the prospect of meeting your Maker and having to account for your sins is terrifying. If a person doesn’t know and believe that Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, was crucified for the world’s sin and rose again on the third day to destroy the power of death, the prospect of death is terrifying. If you don’t know that death is just a sleep from which we will all rise on the Last Day, if the grave is final, then there is no hope. Better go back to denial! Bury your head in the sand and don’t think about such things! Because the alternative is despair. Hopelessness. A bitter, step-by-morbid-step grind as you trudge through this life, each day, each year bringing the day of departure closer. When a loved one dies,

even if you have some vague notion that they went to a better place, there is no solid hope of ever seeing them again. That's despair. That's option two for entering 2024: Despair.

Christian friends, I pray that neither denial nor despair is your companion tonight as we flip the calendar because the third option is so much better. We enter the New Year with joy!

Listen again to where Moses found joy: "Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, step into 2024 with Jesus at your side, and enter the New Year with joy. Another year gone by means another year of God's grace in the books. The old year is a year in which God has graciously forgiven us all our sins for the sake of his dear Son, our Savior Jesus. As many as our sins were in the past year, God's grace and mercy and kindness are infinitely more. At the close of 2023 you are a child of God, a servant of the Most High, a precious soul who has been bought and washed and cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. You are a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. You rest securely in God's love. You are covered with Jesus' perfect righteousness. You are at peace with your Maker. Another year means a year closer to that wonderful moment when you will be released from these earthly bonds, set free from the infirmities of this mortal body, and your soul will be carried by the angels to meet your Savior. You don't have to live in denial about the brevity of life; you embrace it. Because after this short life comes eternity, and you will live with God in the place he is preparing for you in his kingdom, and his kingdom will have no end. When your race is finished here on earth, you will rest from your labors. You get to live each day of the New Year in that confidence, as you greet each day with joy and live each day in the power of the Holy Spirit who lives in you.

It has been said that you can't really know how to live until you know how to die. Once you know how to die, then you can begin to really live. Once you know that your place in the kingdom of God is secure in Jesus, you can go out and live with the joyful, confident exuberance that God created you for. We remember what it means to really live when we think about the word JOY. It can stand for "Jesus, Others, and Yourself." When we live with joy, we put Jesus first, we put others second, and we place ourselves—our own wants and needs—in last place. Living for Jesus, honoring him and putting him first, loving and trusting completely in him—this is a life of joy. Serving our neighbor, putting others before ourselves, helping our brother or sister with deeds of love and kindness—this is a life of joy. Putting our own needs last, trusting confidently that God will provide for us, that we are loved and secure in his hands, and that he is working out all things for our good—this is a life of joy. Because you have been redeemed by Jesus' blood, because you are a forgiven, beloved child of God, because you know that you are heavenward-bound, because you know that death has no sting, and whenever it comes it's the door to heaven—now you can *live!* Now you can live abundantly, in freedom, in complete Christian joy. "One short life, 'twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last."

As we enter a New Year, we have no reason to live in denial. We know our time on earth is short. We know that each day is a gift. We know that this year may be our last. We embrace the reality of our brief, earthly existence, because we know that after this life comes eternity with Jesus. There's no need for denial. We do not enter 2024 like those who live in fear, hopelessness, despair, who don't know of Jesus' forgiveness and the eternal life he won for us, who dread death, who wail and mourn hopelessly at the death of a loved one because they have no prospect of a blessed reunion. We know that our loved ones who departed this life trusting in Jesus are now with Jesus, and soon we will be with him too. We will celebrate a blessed reunion in heaven. We enter the New Year filled with joy. Repent of your sins; receive once again God's forgiveness. Tonight we receive Holy Communion for the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our faith, and our hearts are filled with joy that Jesus has invited us to be his guests at his sacred meal. Let God flood you with his peace and fill you with his joy.

Turn the calendar. Ring in 2024. Enter a New Year of God's abundant grace with a spring in your step and joy in your heart! Amen.