

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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In Sure and Certain Hope

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We've got two months remaining in 2022 and already historians and lexicographers are ready to put this year to bed. Scholars at a publisher of dictionaries in Great Britain oversee a database of 18 billion words in the English language. They take "snapshots" at intervals throughout the year to analyze newspapers and media sites to monitor the words we use to record the year's trends and ethos. From all the sifting, they choose one word as emblematic for the year.

The 2022 word-of-the-year is "permacrisis."

"Permacrisis," describes "an extended period of instability and insecurity." The contraction of "permanent" and "crisis," permacrisis first appeared in academic contexts in the 1970s. In 2022, its usage spiked.

The publisher chose permacrisis not for popularity but for the way it points to the compounding impact of climate change, the war in Europe, a cost-of-living crisis and, in many corners of the world, political upheaval. Their research findings indicate we are "lurch(ing) from one crisis to another without really drawing a breath."¹

When I read this *Washington Post* article, my heart sank even though the word resonated with me. Each week we stand before you to preach the good news alongside the realities of

¹ Adela Suliman, "'Permacrisis' is a dictionary's word of the year in 'truly awful' 2022" *Washington Post*, November 1, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/11/01/permacrisis-2022-word-year-collins-dictionary>.

life. Whatever national tragedy of Monday might be overshadowed by another local heartbreak on Thursday.

It almost felt a relief to know that the burden we carry from COVID and all the political chaos since 2020, along with wildfires, hurricanes, inflation, and now antisemitism's ugly head rearing again, indeed all of this, is heavier than before. It is not a figment of our imagination.

Stories of goodness permeate our lives at Westminster and these south hills, but it takes so many of these shining points to counter the increasing weight of grief upon grief and one crisis giving way to another.

Rather than grow to believe as though the world is truly done, hope died, and that God no longer cares, as people of God we rely upon our faith and turn to scripture.

Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus tells us an enduring story: when Jesus appeared most defeated, God raised him, seated him in power, far above all else, for all time. Trusting that reality turned overcame their crisis and became the foundation of our faith.

Each time we read this letter, we need to remember, Paul wrote it while imprisoned. In those days, one lingered in prison only long enough until a physical punishment, including the possibility of death, was decided. When you stand before your death, your ultimate crisis, what matters in life shines clearly.

Before I read his wisdom, please pray with me.

Dear God, we pause before these words written long ago, seeking to understand the meaning of your son's life, and his invitation to share it. In the stillness of our worship, send your holy spirit to open our hearts and minds to this truth. Bring us close to you and to one another as your son's church. Amen.

Ephesians 1:15-23

¹⁵ I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may perceive what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

²⁰ God put this power to work in Christ when God raised him from the dead and seated him at the right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²² And God has put all things under Christ's feet and has made him the head over all things

for the church,²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

What we know about God and what we do about God can get broken apart by the daily toil in our lives.

As one crisis erupts into another, power brokers prey upon our fear. They push us to doubt what we believe and then divide us into camps, pitted against one another. When this fear infects our lives, we wonder what more we will lose. This self-consumed attitude causes us to lose sight of what God has given us. Then we lose sight of what God invites us to be.

What we know about God and what we do about God can get broken apart if we do not tend to what holds us together.

This was also true in the first century, which is why Paul knits the people back together. Paul prays, maybe for himself as much as the recipients of the letter, “I do not cease to give thanks for you...that God may give you a spirit of wisdom” as you come to know Christ.

Come to know Christ, his life and ministry, his death, and God’s power to raise him to new life. Come to know the way Christ united people across human-constructed barriers of race, gender, religious background. Come to know the way Christ stood up for those bullied by the elites. Come to know the way his grace wipes away our sins. Come to know the way God loves us through him.

Paul continues...for those who know Christ, he prays they will have the eyes of their heart opened to see God here and now. Regardless of what circumstances surround them, Paul promises a “glorious inheritance awaits them and all the saints.”

This rich language holds the seed to our tradition.

Contrary to power brokers who seek to double down on our differences to divide us, Paul encourages us to know this breadth of humanity becomes the very ingredient for the church to thrive.

Then he asks, “do we have the eyes of the heart” that will allow us to look to God for hope and not be duped by some common peddler?

Do we have not just the eyes, but the intestinal strength to be Christ’s presence in the world, working for justice, including the outcast, not letting violent language or violence itself rule.

Christ’s church is formed from heart and gut and faith, by the people whose daily lives say,

“because God raised Jesus from the dead,
we believe God will still make these
broken places whole by what God will do through us.”

On this All-Saints’ Day, we stand at attention to honor our friends and family who died this past year. When we hear their

names, recall their smiles, remember their habits, their passions, their shortcomings, we become even more aware of the fleeting time we walk this earth.

In honoring them, we tend to our own broken hearts. We miss them. We still grieve their absence. Many people, especially Protestants, not to mention those outside the Christian tradition, find celebrating the saints confusing.

To be clear, we honor saints not because they were “stained glass personalities.” These people carried on faithfully, less than perfect, trusting in grace. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a psychiatrist who wrote extensively about death, describes beautiful people. She paints a portrait of our saints.

“The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their ways out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.”²

These beautiful saints are sinners like you and me who willingly see themselves with faults and embody the grace to start again. Think of them as God’s tutors. These saints serve as our tutors to take the task to rise up.

² Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (New York: Scribner, 1997).

Let's not underestimate just how hard that is, particularly in a year when permacrisis describes how one crisis floods into another.

To paraphrase Daniel Pink, "people will choose false certainty over genuine ambiguity any time."³ So be on guard. In the coming days, we'll be bombarded with more false certainty in political ads, claiming one opponent is the devil incarnate on the fast road to hell, or their party alone holds the keys to the golden future.

Set aside the rhetoric and vote. Participate with others, united across the cul-de-sac, and later the aisle.

To vote is a privilege envied by people in so many countries and our responsibility to keep our democracy safe. Pray as you enter the voting booth for God to guide you and our country.

As people of God, our trust is in God and the place created for help. The place is Westminster, where we come together.

The hard labor of rummage generated funds for mission and included the community as in years past.

Looking towards the future, we will throw open the doors to welcome everyone, regardless of whether they share our faith or not, to be place of healing.

³ Maria Popova, "Why the Best Roadmap to an Interesting Life Is the One You Make Up as You Go Along: Daniel Pink's Commencement Address," *The Marginalian*, September 18, 2015.

As the mental health of teens plummeted in recent years, we now hold tender and honest conversations. This week we will learn to tend our youth who identify as LGBTQ. They suffer anxiety and illnesses and instances of self-harm and suicide at an order of magnitude greater – because we don't know how to love them the way God made them. We can make a difference in this community by standing with and for them.

It all comes down to this: is there any point in being alive without helping other people?

That's why this church was founded and continues. Through this church, we receive the promise to life and life eternal. Through this church, we find the strength to live. Through this church we become embody the hope for others. In sure and certain hope, we trust Christ.



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