

2014 – The Year of Laughter

Welcome to the first Sunday service of a brand new year! 2014! There is always something exciting about entering into a new year for me. Fresh opportunities, new possibilities, a clean slate, a new page upon which to write. Last Sunday we were planning to start the year off right with a great day and then the weather refused to cooperate and incidentally, I was sick in bed with a bug of some kind and after a long night I was thinking, “Yeah, right, welcome to a great start of a new year. So much for a year of laughter.”

I usually take a couple of Sundays in January to help us focus on the new year and to point us in a healthier path. The past couple of years I have made predictions about the coming year or at least mentioned some things we should watch for. I looked back to see what I said last January. It was interesting to me how quickly things have changed, how far the pendulum has swung. I talked last year about the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the role of President Morsi. Now Morsi is under house arrest, likely facing trial and the Muslim Brotherhood has been outlawed in Egypt, the ruling government proclaiming the Brotherhood to be a terrorist organization. The last chapter on this has not been written so stay tuned.

Last January I said Russia’s president Putin would continue to be a bully. While I think he is still a bully, he has stepped in to portray himself as a broker of peace and a deal maker in Syria, Iran and other places. His skill at making deals should be a cause for concern for the US and for Israel. It will be interesting to see what strange bedfellows Putin chooses in the coming year. Watch for growing alliances with Russia. All the while, the role of the United States as a world power diminishes.

Iran has grown strangely silent which is further cause for alarm. Don’t be deceived. Nothing has changed in Iran with the exception of the new President (Hassan Rouhani) toning down the extreme rhetoric of his predecessor (Mahmoud Amadinejan.). China is exercising new muscle and North Korea’s leader remains as unstable and unpredictable as ever. (I think he and Dennis Rodman deserve each other.) There are changes coming in the European Union and there will be continual unrest and violent protest in Europe over immigration and inflation.

America continues its moral slide. Tolerance as a virtue is held higher than truth, righteousness, common sense. It’s not a question of will same sex marriage become the law of the land and will churches be forced to perform same sex ceremonies, but simply when or what

will be the penalty for refusing. As despised as the church may become for our stand on certain moral issues, more and more people will turn to the church for assistance as the gap between the rich and the poor grows wider. I believe young leaders in the church will find a new voice, a new way to express the truth of the Scripture without compromise but also without some of the judgmentalism and rancor of the past. I am trying to remain hopeful in spite of all we see in our world and in our nation.

Romans 8 tells us the whole of creation is groaning for redemption and we continue to see evidence of that already this new year with the extreme, record breaking weather patterns. Earthquakes and volcanoes and man made and natural disasters are all part of the signs of the planet and creation itself groaning for God's redemption.

With all of those happy things said, we come to 2014. We describe Carbondale as a place of healing, hope, laughter and peace. We decided a couple of years ago to use that statement as a basis for a yearly emphasis so 2012 was the year of healing, 2013 was the year of hope and 2014 is to be the year of laughter. You're already thinking "What is there to laugh about?" Nothing sounds too funny with all the bad things happening in the world. You are correct, but let me give you a couple of thoughts regarding the basis for laughter.

I'm not talking about telling jokes, about laughing foolishly, with no regard to the circumstances we face. Just twelve days into the new year and we are already too far in to be naive about what the year holds. There have already been tears and goodbyes, failures, disappointments and hurts. We aren't talking about a foolish dismissal of reality, we are talking about choosing joy in spite of the bad days. We are choosing to celebrate who we are in Christ regardless to the circumstances, to rejoice in his faithfulness, to laugh because we rest in his promises. We are talking about what the bible calls a merry heart (remember a merry heart does good like a medicine.) **We are talking about laughter and joy, based not upon what we see, but upon what we know!** The songwriter said in speaking of joy, "the world didn't give it to me and the world can't take it away."

We are talking about joy, laughter that comes from that settledness in knowing that God is in control, Sovereign over all. It is joy based upon the knowledge that his word is forever settled, established and cannot fail. **"Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens."** Psalm 119:89. How can I laugh and have joy when all these things are happening

around me? Because I know that Roman 8 tells me God causes all things to work together for good to those who love him and are called according to his purpose. I can laugh because I know Colossians 1 tells me that “He is before all things and in him all things hold together....that in everything he might have the supremacy.” Col. 1:17. I can laugh because I know he has promised to never leave me and never forsake me, that he will go with me to the end of the age.

I read the passage in Proverbs 31 this week that speaks of the wife of noble character. Preachers often use this passage on mother’s day, or at funerals for a godly wife. But I read it this week in a different way than I had ever read it before. I read the chapter thinking about the church as the bride of Christ. It calls us to a level of excellence and preparedness that is worth considering. One thing stood out to me in light of this sermon today and our theme for the year. The writer said of this wife, this bride of noble character, **“She is clothed with strength and dignity. She can laugh at the days to come.” Proverbs 31:25**

I’m worried that perhaps we the church in America have failed to clothe ourselves with strength and dignity. But we can certainly work towards it can’t we? If we want to be the church that can still laugh and rejoice in the face of all that may be coming, what do we need to do? Let me suggest a couple of things this morning as I try to make sense out of all of this. First of all, understand our year of laughter is based upon **Outlook, Knowledge and Trust.**

The only way we can laugh and rejoice this year is if we have the right outlook. **Our outlook is that of a born again believer.** Jesus told us what our outlook should be. **“When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Luke 21:28.** Our outlook is not that of everyone else on this planet. We aren’t dreading doomsday. We aren’t ducking our heads in fear, we are being presented with an extraordinary opportunity to be light in an ever darkening world. We are supposed to stand up and stand for something. Are we going to be the bearers of God’s truth or will we surrender to the pressures of culture? People talk about prepers, people preparing for the end of the world, stockpiling guns and ammo and food, but our outlook says, “Prepare to be the bold church of the living God. Prepare to share what we know about Jesus and the good news. Prepare for the coming of the Lord.” We aren’t preparing for death and destruction, we are anticipating redemption and liberation! The whole planet is groaning for and longing for that redemption. Our outlook is different from those who don’t know Christ.

Jesus said men's hearts will fail them for fear as they see terrible things happening on this planet, but the heart of the believer doesn't fail, instead it is drawn to greater faith, to greater trust in God because we see God's word being fulfilled! Our outlook allows us to laugh, to rejoice even in the face of difficult days to come.

We can laugh at the days to come because of knowledge of God's word. I just said our hearts don't fail because we see God's word being fulfilled, but if you don't know what the bible says, then you don't know what's happening. Jesus said when we see these things beginning to take place, we know what to do because we know what it means. He has given us knowledge and understanding in his word to recognize the signs.

Jesus grew up around the sea of Galilee so he spoke of reading the signs that indicated storms or fair weather on the sea in Matthew 16. He spoke of the budding of the fig tree and knowing the seasons. The people knew what to expect because they had knowledge, they could read the signs. That's what he is telling us. He has given us his word so we can read the signs. We can know how to live and what we should do but we have to know his word.

We can laugh in the face of the future because our trust is in the Lord. We don't have to be afraid because as I said a moment ago, he is the one in whom all things hold together. He is at work in our life causing all things to work together for our good. We have no cause for fear. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not to your own understanding the bible says, in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.

Our outlook, our knowledge, our willingness to trust are all based upon God's revelation to us. He desires to continue to reveal himself to us. How will that happen in the coming year?

Remember the wife of noble character in Proverbs 31? The reason she could laugh at the future is because she was prepared. She had done her work. Preparedness. Again, I'm not talking about stockpiling food, water and weapons, you can if you want to. I'm talking about preparing our hearts to be able to see and hear what God is saying to us. Preparing our hearts for his continued revelation of himself and his nature to us. Preparing our hearts to continue to walk in obedience to the Lord. If God desires to reveal himself and his ways to us, then I want to make sure my heart is prepared to listen and learn and receive all he desires for me. Let me quickly remind us of four obvious, basic things we need to do to be prepared for whatever may come.

First of all,

Pray! The church was born out of a prayer meeting in Acts 2. We won't be able to find our way if we aren't praying. If God is revealing himself and his plans and purpose to us, then we need to be communicating with him. That happens as we pray. Bro. McQueen used to say "you can run a bank without money easier than you can run a church without prayer." As a church, as the bride of Christ, we will be weak, tired, powerless, unprepared if we aren't bathing everything in prayer. I want to encourage us to make 2014 a year of prayer.

Read God's word! If we are going to be able to withstand all that the enemy may throw at us in 2014, we have to know what God's word says. If we are going to be prepared and equipped like the bride of Christ should be, we must know what the bible says. Too many even in the church are taking our cues from the world as to how we live, how we talk, how we dress, how we raise our children, what we love and what we despise, rather than building our lives and basing our choices upon God's holy word. If we are going to build a life, we need to have the right plans, the right pattern to follow. The word of God has a blueprint for life. Follow it and know the peace and blessings of God. Reject it and you find the way to be hard.

What does the bible say? What does the bible say about relationships? I know what your ninth grade friends say about sex, but what does the bible say about it? What does it say about how you dress? What does it say about sex, about divorce, adultery, homosexuality, living together before marriage? Not what our culture says about all of this, but what does God say about it? What does the bible say about employer/employee relationships? About honesty, truth, lying, gossip, stealing, gambling, laziness, vanity, gluttony, idolatry, horoscopes, death, dying, heaven, hell? Do you want to know? Read the bible! Study God's word.

I challenge you to make 2014 a year of studying God's word. Read it faithfully. Read it and write down those passages that speak to your heart. Read it and write down the questions you have. Don't just read it looking for promises or for loopholes. Read it looking for God's way, God's path, God's truth. Read it and pray about the passages you read. "God, help me to live out what I just read, to obey what you are asking of me in your word." When you read God's word and begin to build your life upon his word, that means obeying God's word, you will be building your life on something that can withstand all the storms and troubles you might encounter in 2014. Commit to building your life and living your life in obedience to God's word,

but in order to do that, you have to read and study the bible.

Rely upon the Holy Spirit! Jesus said the Holy Spirit would dwell within us and be with us and he would convict us of sin, guide us into truth, teach us and bring back to our memory the things we read in God's word. He would testify of Jesus, empower us, equip us to live Godly lives. He would produce the character qualities of Christ within us, the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, gentleness, meekness, temperance and faith. He will gift us and provide us with spiritual discernment we need, with the wisdom and knowledge we need to make right choices in our life. Rely upon the Holy Spirit. Trust him to guide you and direct your steps. Open your heart to the work, the ministry, the person and life of the Holy Spirit. Ask him to fill your heart and life with his daily and abiding presence. Look for ways to make yourself aware of the Holy Spirit's presence and his working in your life. Ask the Lord for increased sensitivity to the voice and direction of the Holy Spirit. Just take a moment every day to say "Lord, I believe you want to lead me and I am listening for the voice and direction of the Holy Spirit today."

I encourage you to make 2014 a year of reliance upon the Holy Spirit. Ask the Lord to fill you with his Holy Spirit. Open your heart to a renewed fellowship and a renewed experience with the Holy Spirit. If you've never been baptized in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues, ask the Lord to baptize you. Open your heart to that spiritual empowerment and the blessings of that spiritual prayer language. I believe the Lord wants to pour his Holy Spirit out upon us in spiritual power and blessings. Let's rely upon the work of the Holy Spirit and his assistance as never before this year. Finally,

Relationships! God intends for us to be rightly related to Him through his grace and then rightly related to others. For believers, he made us a part of the body of Christ, the church. The bible describes the church in a number of ways. I wrote a book several years ago called *Without Spot or Wrinkle* and described a number of ways the bible speaks of the church. If we are going to handle everything that 2014 might throw at us and still be able to face the future with laughter, I suggest we will be better off facing it with God's people, the church.

Understand, Christians aren't perfect. At times we can be quirky, strange, weird, wired, compulsive. I've seen us "church-folks" be selfish, proud, arrogant, vain, downright mean. I've also seen us be extraordinarily compassionate, merciful, forgiving, loving, caring, giving. We get

it right sometimes and sometimes we don't. We are flawed. It's because we are sinners saved by his great grace and constantly in need of that same mercy, forgiveness and grace.

But as weird and flawed as we are, and as ornery and mean and judgmental as I've seen us be at times, I'd still rather line up on the side with God's people. As we see things growing more difficult Scripture suggests we need to assemble together more often to encourage one another. **“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Hebrews 10:25**

I'm not trying to get you to come to this building more often, but I'm trying to get you to recognize your need to be in relationship with God's people. We are going to rely upon one another more and more because the day is coming when there will be no one else upon whom we can rely. Remember, we are the body of Christ. We are connected to one another. We are depending upon one another. We need one another!

I'll tell you now we, (that is the collective we, meaning Carbondale Assembly of God), we probably won't be enough for some and we won't rise to your expectation as a church family, but let's be honest, it's likely you won't rise to someone else's expectations either. We are all flawed, remember. But how about we choose to work on building healthy relationships this year?

How about each of us work on becoming a person upon whom others can rely. That thought struck me this week. Am I reliable? Can others rely upon me? Can others rely upon you? Friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, fellow students. Remember Jesus said, “the Son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Are you looking for a way to be served or to serve others? What if we made 2014 a year of reliable service to others? What if 2014 became the year that we would purposefully relate to God's people and not only God's people, but we will purposefully relate to others, to share the love of God and advance his kingdom? How good would that be to let someone know, “You can rely on me!”

Get to know the people of God. Get to know the people you worship with. Get involved in the life of this church. Keep in mind, we are a weird bunch, but what better way to experience a year of laughter than laughing along with a bunch of weirdos like us as we do life together.

With a heavenly outlook, biblically based knowledge and a faithful trust in God, we can

pray, read God's word, rely upon the Holy Spirit, rely upon each other and face 2014 with laughter, with joy, with anticipation. **Whatever comes our way, we are going to laugh, rejoice, celebrate, rest in His timing, and trust in His grace. 2014, here we come!**