

## Look and Listen

Welcome to the first Sunday of 2022. I have to admit I'm usually excited about a new year but this one seems to be starting out like the last one ended. Can you believe we are entering into a third year of a worldwide pandemic? I don't know of anyone that is sad to say goodbye to 2021. There was so much loss and heartache in 2021. I preached or participated in more funerals in 2021 than any year in the past 41 years. There were plenty of times in 2021 that I was saying, "Lord, what are you doing? Where are you in this? You missed a good opportunity there, Lord." God bless those who always seem to know what God is up to and have an explanation for everything but I have to say when it gets right down to it, I don't always know. What is he doing here in his church and what is he doing in the world, and what's going on in heaven, and how is God's redemption plan working in us? How do the events of 2021 fit into God's plan and how do we move ahead with hope and confidence into 2022? There is plenty of mystery in it all and I think we have to learn to be content with the mystery. There are things that happened in 2021 we won't understand this side of heaven. But here is what I know. **"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Romans 8:28** I think it was Chris Green I heard restate that verse this way, **God is infinitely active and present in His work and His work is for our good!** It's redemptive work. In fact, we are his work, his workmanship. He is working for our good! This is how we leave 2021 in God's hands and move ahead into a new year, without fear, still confident, still full of hope. God is at work in infinite ways, acting in ways beyond our understanding, and his work is ultimately for our good. Rest in that. But know that isn't all. It isn't all mystery that can't yet be revealed. Remember last Sunday I said Christ had come, the Word made flesh and everything had changed, but you had to be looking and listening. It's the truth. God is still speaking and acting and moving among us, but you have to be looking and listening.

If God is still speaking and acting, how are we to hear what he says and how are we to see what he is doing? One of the ways is by the work of the Holy Spirit as he opens the Word of God to us. God speaks to us by His Word and we are inviting everyone to read the Scripture with us this year. This is one of the ways we are going to look and listen to what the Lord is saying and doing. This is one of the ways he makes himself known to us.

Think for a minute about the disciples. These people, not only the twelve, but there were others that followed Jesus, the 72, the 120. They followed him, spent three years with him in public ministry. They saw miracles, healings, feeding the five thousand, calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee, walking on water, raising a dead girl, a widow's son, raising Lazarus after he had been dead and buried for four days, but even after all of this, they were still uncertain, unsure about who he was. When Jesus was crucified they thought it was all over, in spite of the fact Jesus had said he would be crucified and in three days rise again. When the women came to tell the disciples the tomb was empty and they had seen the risen Christ, they didn't believe it. They thought the women were hysterical. When Jesus appeared to them they thought he was a ghost. They witnessed all of these things, yet somehow they still weren't convinced. What did it? Father John Behr in his book *The Mystery of Christ* writes, **“Despite having been with Christ for a number of years, having heard his words and seen his marvelous actions, the disciples did not yet really understand him. Only after his Passion, his crucifixion and exaltation, do they begin to understand who Christ is and what he has done, and they did this by turning back to the Scriptures. Speaking of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, John comments that ‘his disciples did not understand this at first; but when Jesus was glorified, they remembered that this had been written of him and had been done to him.’ John 12:16.”** ...John Behr It was the Scripture that revealed and confirmed to them who Jesus was: Savior, Son of God, Lord.

We find Jesus in the Scripture. Remember, there was no New Testament at that time. They found Jesus revealed in the Old Testament. Do you remember after the resurrection when Jesus appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus? They didn't recognize him and he talked with them about the events in Jerusalem. Remember what Luke tells us? Jesus asked the two disciples, **“Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”** Luke 24:27. The Scriptures reveal Jesus to us. Still disguised to them, they invited him to stay at the inn with them. **“When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’”** Luke 24:30-32. I love how Jesus opens the Scripture to us.

They hurried back to Jerusalem and told the other disciples what had happened and “how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.” Look and listen.

Revelation came to them as Jesus opened the Scripture to them and as he broke bread with them. Some see this suggesting the Eucharist. Jesus revealed in the Scripture and in the breaking of bread in communion. They looked and listened and they saw Jesus! So will we! It’s important for us to look and listen to what he is doing and saying and we too will find him and hear him in the Scripture. That being the case, it’s important we read and study and interact with the Bible every day. We think intentional and systematic reading of Scripture is so important that we want to help facilitate this for everyone in the church. Pastor Brian White is our discipleship pastor and he has been working to put this together. I appreciate the work he is doing. So we are offering 3 reading plans for 2022.

To start with, each day we will post a “Verse of the Day” on our social media. We think this is a great way to get started in daily interaction with the Bible. Everyone can handle reading a verse each day. (We already have a memory verse each Sunday for the kids and adults).

We are also making a plan available that will systematically take you through reading the entire New Testament, along with Psalms and Proverbs, in a year. This will require about 10 to 15 minutes of reading each day. This is a great next step in structured Bible study.

Finally, we have a plan that will lead you through reading the entire Bible in a year. Each day you will be given an Old Testament reading, a New Testament reading, and reading from Psalms or Proverbs every-other day. (That way you don’t give up when you get to Leviticus or Numbers!) This should require about 20 to 30 minutes of reading each day.

We have the plans available in print form at the information desk, but in order to facilitate interaction and accountability, we want to encourage you to sign up for the plan on your phone through the free Youversion app. You can scan the code on the screen with your phone’s camera and follow the link to join our plan. **The code on your left is for the New Testament plan and the code on your right is for the whole bible plan.** These codes will also be available at the information desk in the lobby and there are some volunteers there to help you navigate the sign-up process for those of us less tech-savy.

The New Testament plan and the Whole Bible plan are coordinated so they overlap each other. In other words, if you are just using the New Testament plan, those reading the whole bible will be reading the same New Testament passages at the same time. Our hope is that this

plan will help you not only read the Bible, but also interact with it and with others. We encourage you to underline, highlight, memorize, share, and talk about what you are reading each day. Look for, listen for and find Jesus, the living Word, in the Scripture.

The new year gives us a fresh start. Let's capitalize on that opportunity by committing to the spiritual discipline of regular and systematic Bible study. Scan the code and commit to a reading plan. Grab a reading plan at the info desk and tuck it into your bible. Set a reminder to check social media for our verse of the day every morning. Let's look and see what Jesus is doing and saying this year through his word! Let me just quickly assure you of a couple of things I know he is doing in 2022.

**We know He is at work and His mercy is new every morning.** The prophet Jeremiah, standing in the rubble of his beloved city, facing a year of the unknown declared, **“Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Lamentations 3:22-23** I don't know what 2022 will hold, but I'll be looking for and listening for His mercy. Thank God his mercy is available, his loving kindness is shown to us in a variety of ways each and every day. Goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our life David said. Keep looking for and listening for Jesus and his mercy this year. You'll find it.

**We know God is at work making us more like Jesus.** I said at the beginning that “God is infinitely active and present in His work and His work is for our good!” His plan is not just to make us happy or keep us entertained. His plan is to make us more and more like Jesus because to be like Jesus is to be a true human being, to be all that God intended and created us to be. The bible says **“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son...” Romans 8:29** His plan is that we will become more and more like Jesus in 2022. That's going to happen as we look and listen, as we study His word and as we are changed by our knowledge of His word. We are transformed by the renewing of our mind as we study God's word and hide his word in our heart.

“The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” We read that passage last Sunday from John 1. God's plan is that as His word transforms us and makes us more like Jesus, the Word will continue to become flesh, this time in and through us. We will live out his word and put it into action in ways that others will see Jesus in us. We will live in such a way that the

word will continue to dwell among us, through us. We have a responsibility. Let's look and listen and allow the Lord to make us more and more like Jesus.

We are going to take communion together this morning. As we do, here is what I know about the new year. **Whatever happens in 2022, we know He has redeemed us, He is at work in us, He is with us and He is preparing us for His return.** That's the testimony we proclaim as we celebrate communion. "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

As we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim his death. Not just that he was crucified, but we proclaim his passion, that he died, that he rose again, that he ascended to the father. We proclaim that through the sacrifice of his blood there is a new covenant, that through his death and resurrection we are redeemed, saved, we belong to him, and there is nothing that can happen in 2022 that can separate us from him and from his love.

As we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim that he is at work in us. It's not just about something that happened to Jesus in the past, it is proclaiming that something is happening to us in the present. We are transformed by his cross, his sacrifice. We are given life in him as we participate in His transformative work. I said he is making us conformable to his image. Look and listen and say yes to his work and a walk of obedience. Say yes to him and pursue holiness in your walk, in your choices, say yes to meeting him in the Scripture each day, participate in what he is doing and saying by talking and listening to him each day in prayer and in praise, say yes to what he is doing by participating in the life of the church, attending and serving.

As we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim he is with us. Various parts of the church over the centuries have explained this in different ways but we know he is with us. When two or three gather in his name, he is with us. When we gather at his table we are declaring Jesus is with us, his presence as real as the bread and the cup we hold. Whatever 2022 holds, I know who holds us, I know who is with us, I know who will cover us with mercy, I know who will keep us, comfort us, provide for us – the One who is with us here, now, in this moment. We proclaim he is with us. Look and listen.

As we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim he is preparing us for his return. Paul said we proclaim his death and resurrection, his saving power and life giving presence until he comes. We eat the bread and drink the cup while looking up in anticipation of his return. He is

coming again and we live our lives in expectation and in hope. It's why we don't give in to despair, regardless of what happened in 2021 or regardless of what we might encounter in 2022. Jesus is with us, He is at work in us and He's coming again so we can be with him.

We gather this morning uncertain of what's ahead, but certain of Jesus and His presence. On this first Sunday of the new year we do what the church has done for almost 2000 years. We stand in the darkness of our world and culture with our light shining. The darkness may be deep, but the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ still penetrates the darkness and offers hope. We stand with our heads lifted up because we know his redemption is drawing closer. We stand with the cup and the bread in our hands, declaring He has redeemed us, He is with us, He is at work in us, He is coming again and we have hope. Regardless of the darkness there is light. Regardless of the circumstances, there is hope. Look and listen! Jesus is with us and there is hope! There is reason to rejoice and give thanks! Tell yourself that this morning. Hold that bread and cup in your hands and face this coming year and tell yourself, Jesus is with me and there is hope! I'm going to proclaim it until he comes, that through Jesus there is hope! Look and listen for him. Find him and find that hope!

The apostle Paul wrote... (1 Corinthians 11:23)

Look and listen. There is good news. Your sins are forgiven, there is healing available, there is peace in the storm, there is mercy available every day, Jesus is with us, he is "infinitely active and present in His work and His work is for our good!" You may not feel much better about 2022, but we can feel better about Jesus and all he has planned for us!