

## **Hindsight is 2020**

We've made it to the last Sunday of 2020. Hallelujah! It couldn't get here fast enough for most of us. There were perhaps days when you wondered if you would make it through the year and yet, thanks be to God, here we are on this final Sunday. I want to just take a few minutes to reflect on the year and encourage you, to celebrate the faithfulness of God.

They say hindsight is 20/20. Looking back at the message I preached on the first Sunday of 2020, I said then I felt this would be a year of blessing and a year people were to come home to Carbondale. That didn't turn out the way I pictured it, but in hindsight, looking back at the year, let me tell you what I see.

2020 has been a year when people came home to Carbondale. Although they haven't come home in person, to this physical location, this morning we have people joining us on line from all over the city and across the nation. We've had people come home that hadn't attended in years but they found us once again on line and we are so thankful and thrilled to have you joining us. We have others I haven't ever met personally, but you are watching each Sunday and Wednesday. To each of you joining us online, wherever you are, welcome home to Carbondale! I'm thankful that others found us online and then began attending in house and we are glad you've become part of our Carbondale family in 2020 as well. Thanks for coming home!

Some have come home to a deeper faith in the Lord Jesus. All of us have had to encourage ourselves in the Lord and find new ways perhaps of growing spiritually, new ways of making sure we are being disciplined on our own. We've had to take responsibility for our spiritual walk. Good for you! I think our pastors have done an outstanding job of trying to provide ways online to stay connected, to encourage you in your walk with the Lord. Keep coming home to the church, keep coming home to the faith, keep coming home to Carbondale and keep connecting with us by every means available.

I felt it was to be a year of blessing. I don't know what I pictured when I thought of blessing. Prosperity, healing, anointed services, increasing opportunities for ministry and service. I recall one of the last services we had before the lockdown last spring. I was worshiping the Lord and knew we were going to have to shutdown the in house, in person services for a while. I said "Lord, I thought this was to be a year of blessing." I felt it wash over me as the Holy Spirit whispered "it's a year for Carbondale to be a blessing." I thought it was

about receiving, but it was about giving! Remember Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Acts 20:35. We were blessed so we could be a blessing!

We don’t do a very good job sometimes of celebrating the ways this church blesses others. In part, we feel like doing things quietly, without fanfare allows the Lord to get the honor and credit and not us and that’s what we prefer. At the same time, we don’t want anyone we’ve been able to help to feel we exploited their circumstances. “And here’s a picture of us helping a family in need.” We don’t ever want that to happen but I want to share with you some ways we were able to be a blessing because of your faithfulness and your giving in 2020. If hindsight is 2020, then here is cause for rejoicing and celebration.

If you remember we were already distributing groceries on a monthly basis with our fourth Sunday food share. If you didn’t know, we were also giving away groceries everyday of the week to families in the community in need. When the pandemic hit we just increased our numbers. We were buying groceries when the George Kaiser Family Foundation reached out to us and said they would supply groceries for us because we were a Talking is Teaching site already. From mid-March through this last week, nine months, they have supplied us with groceries, including fresh vegetables and fruit, every week. During our Season of Hope, you brought groceries that allowed us to supplement what we were already giving, to especially bless families at Thanksgiving and Christmas. You brought diapers and we were able to bless families with those extra things, toiletries, and so on in addition to the groceries. We even had a donation of wrapping paper and Christmas items we were able to give away. Anywhere from 30 to 60 families per week, each Thursday, have been blessed with groceries and more than that, with friendly and familiar faces and a word of encouragement. If you need groceries, call the church and let us know and we will get you on the list!

Through our Season of Hope, you purchased shoes and provided so that every child in our partner schools, Robertson and Clinton, received a new pair of shoes. The teachers helped us so we had each child’s size and their name. Thank you Pastor Brittany and Metzli Bravo who purchased and packaged every pair of shoes. Approximately 600 pairs of shoes for 600 children! Thank you Carbondale for giving and thank you to the teachers that helped us! To all of our teachers, God bless you for all the ways you have adapted and served children and families.

Speaking of that, we were able to bless the teachers in our church with gift cards to help with supplies and whatever they needed to teach through all the challenges of this year! We also

blessed our health care workers, our doctors and nurses with a gift card and a note just letting them know we appreciate them and we are praying for them. Keep praying for our health care workers and our first responders. We are behind you!

We helped a couple of our evangelists that had their meetings cancelled during the lockdown last spring, giving them support for three months. Through a generous donation we were able to help some who were laid off or who had hours cut here at the end of the year.

You remained faithful and we were able to continue our regular missions support to our missionary family around the world. In addition to that, our missionaries to Mexico, Daniel and Janine Hazelrigg and their children were told by their area directors to come home because of the lack of health care in the remote part of the country where they serve. They reached out to us and we were able to immediately supply them a place to live in our missions house.

You may recall, an opportunity was presented to help with Project Rescue. Because of the pandemic, the sex trade in some parts of the world was affected. No customers meant the women were being set free and sent away with no place to go. Project Rescue stepped in to help these women, to provide safe housing and job training so they wouldn't have to go back to that way of life. We were able to give \$25,000 to Project Rescue and a matching grant doubled the impact of that gift for these ladies and their children! Praise God!

You are familiar with our camp facility at Sparks Oklahoma. The Oklahoma District has been building a fabulous new building that will serve as a gymnasium but also as a tornado shelter, able to resist an F5 tornado to keep our children and teenagers safe at camp. The District had suggested the churches consider a donation of \$400 per student that attends our church. The board voted to give \$50,000 to help complete the facility at Sparks. In addition, we gave \$5,000 to LFTL, \$6,500 to BGMC and \$17,000 to STL.

I'm excited to share this news with you. I had a couple of pastors tell me about their church's involvement with RIP Medical Debt. This is a Christian non-profit that buys up medical debt for pennies on the dollar and then forgives the debt. I contacted them to see if there was something we could do in Tulsa. I thought it would fit well with our Season of Hope and could be a blessing to so many families if during this pandemic they no longer had outstanding medical debts hanging over them. They told me that gratefully, and some of you may have seen this in the news just a few weeks ago, a family and some generous partners working through RIP Medical Debt had purchased all the medical debt for Tulsa County. 28 million dollars of

medical debt had been forgiven. They told me however, that there was a need in Creek County and Okmulgee County. I shared the need and the opportunity to bless families with the board and they agreed. I'm happy to tell you that because of your faithful giving, and by partnering with RIP Medical Debt, I was told the letters went out this week from RIP Medical Debt to 1675 families in Creek and Okmulgee County, telling them that through a donation from Carbondale Assembly of God, "You no longer owe the referenced debts to the provider listed in this letter." A total of \$1,805,233.09 in outstanding medical debt was forgiven. An average of \$1,077.75 per family. What a blessing to 1675 families. You're giving made that possible in 2020.

I'm just hitting the highlights. I wish I could tell you about the grateful responses from people for the groceries and the gifts. We gave money to help feed pastors and their families in Africa that were affected by the pandemic. You and your gifts made a difference. People were saved and impacted because of your giving and your prayers. I don't have time to tell you about emails and messages sent, appreciating the online services, appreciating the efforts to keep people safe and appreciating the creativity and outstanding efforts of the pastoral staff to continue to minister and serve. It's been some kind of year. Unprecedented, but...

Hindsight is 20/20 and 2020 is looking better in some ways. Despite all the difficulties, all the challenges, all the changes, we can see God's faithfulness, we can see lives being blessed and changed, we can see God at work!

I said in a sermon some time back that while the challenges of this year seem unprecedented, I'm sure the folks in 1941 felt like the whole world was changing, and it was. We've faced challenges before and we will face them again. Looking back at 2020, we had to say goodbye to some precious people, but in our loss, we found God still with us, God still demonstrating his faithfulness to us.

Looking back we saw opportunities to be salt and light. When the world around us shows greater decay, that's when it needs the salt of the church: truth, righteousness, righteous words and actions. When the world around is growing darker, that's when it needs the church to shine its' light brighter and the light we shine, the light we hold up is Jesus! He is the Light of the world. We've tried our best to keep Jesus at the forefront of everything we've done and everything we've said this year and that's my plan for 2021. Let's find ways to lift Jesus higher. Let's keep Jesus out front, in front, central to all we say and do.

I don't know what 2021 will hold. The problems and challenges of 2020 aren't going away, in fact, they are probably deepening. What a time to be the church! What a time to know Jesus and to the ones bringing good news.

In that sermon in January of this year, I mentioned asking God for 20/20 vision. Well, maybe he gave us 20/20 vision. That too wasn't what we expected. But maybe we learned some valuable lessons this year about Jesus, about ourselves, about what the church is really all about, that it isn't all about buildings and programs, but about people and serving and caring for others. If hindsight is 2020, I hope the lessons we've learned are to keep lifting up Jesus. A lot of people prophesied and predicted a lot of things that may not have happened or may not come true, but if you'll keep your eyes on Jesus, if you'll keep looking to Jesus, if you'll keep the conversation about Jesus, if you'll keep trusting in Jesus and His word, if you'll keep pointing others to Jesus, if you'll make 2021 about Jesus, that's going to be the key! Take the lessons of 2020 hindsight and focus our attention ever more on Jesus!

I want us to pray and give thanks to God for the blessings of 2020! In spite of the setbacks, in spite of the challenges, in spite of the loss, can you see with 2020 hindsight his faithfulness, his hands holding you and guiding you? Can you see him at work in and through all the events and the moments of 2020? If you can't thank him for anything else, can you thank Him that you're still here! Your faith is still holding on to Him. 2020 hindsight says you've got reason to rejoice. Let's give him praise!

May the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.