

SERMON TITLE: "Starting the New Year Well: Spiritually"
SERMON TEXT: Hebrews 12:1-13
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 22, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

The other day I ran across a United Methodist podcast program called "Get Your Spirit in Shape." That free 30-minute podcast is produced monthly by United Methodist Communications and is paid for by our "Tithe-Plus for Mission" dollars. The United Methodist Communications webpage indicates that, just like we need to take good care of our physical bodies, so we also need to take care of our spiritual needs. They suggest that one way to care for our spirits could be to listen to their "Get Your Spirit in Shape" podcast which features "conversations with leaders, authors, and others who offer spiritual nutrition and exercises for our everyday lives."¹

Curious about this spiritual resource, I listened to their most recent episode, which featured author and popular speaker Mike Hargue who grew up as a very confident fundamentalist Christian, later experienced increasing doubt and became an atheist, and then, through a series of events, came to a different kind of Christian faith. Mike Hargue, who is known on the speaking and podcast circuit as "Science Mike," told how he learned to embrace wonder and strength in the nuances of doubt as well as assurance. He is now finding and expressing his spiritual wellness in and through the United Methodist Church.²

Our spiritual health and wellness is important. That may seem like a pretty obvious thing for a preacher to say during a worship service. But our lives are so hectic with jobs, school, family, civic involvement, athletic events, grocery shopping, laundry, shoveling snow, volunteer activities, and doctor appointments, that sometimes we just have to pause and remember. Yes, we human beings do have a spirit: a spirit that needs to be nurtured and developed; a spirit that needs to be protected, challenged, and encouraged; a spirit that needs to be exercised and fed nutrients every bit as much as our brains, bodies, and emotions do.

So, let's take some time this morning to investigate Hebrews chapter 12. Let's see what these first 13 verses can tell us about starting the New Year well spiritually.

1—CONSIDER THE CLOUD OF WITNESSES

The writer of this letter to the Hebrews gives three clear suggestions. In verse one, we see that the first way to start the New Year well spiritually is to consider the cloud of witnesses. The imagery of this passage is that of an athletic arena. The witnesses are like fans in the bleachers who surround the playing field or track. This crowd of onlookers is there to cheer us on and help us reach the goal. By using the image "cloud of witnesses," the writer was indicating more than a current-day group of spiritual peers. The writer intended to include people of faith from times past, as well. In chapter 11, the author had written about Abraham and Sarah, Joseph and Moses, Gideon, Samson, David, the prophets, and others who "won strength out of weakness," "were tortured," and yet "were commended for their faith."

If we are familiar with their names and their stories, if we have steeped ourselves in the words of scripture that tell of their amazing deeds and heroism, then we can have this strong confidence that this cloud of witnesses surrounds us. We can be inspired by their ability to survive hardship by relying on God's strength, even when they were up against tremendous odds. When adversity pushed them to their limits, those fathers and mothers of faith did not give in or give up. As chapter 11 says, they "suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two . . . They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground." This cloud of witnesses may not have survived physically, but they lived on spiritually in resurrection, and now are available to hearten and spur us on toward the goal.

Of course, our own personal cloud of witnesses includes more than the biblical characters. Many of us have had the positive influence of tremendously spiritual grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, and neighbors. We have been inspired by the witnesses we have known in the church as preachers, Sunday school teachers, and lay men and women who served the church and their community with a faith that

overcame incredible odds. The writer to the Hebrews invites us to strengthen our spirits by remembering all those witnesses who surround us. If you find yourself forgetting them, then get back into reading the scriptures. Reflect on those leaders of churches you have attended in the past. Recall your family elders who believed in God and trusted in Jesus Christ for their salvation. Think of all of us here in this sanctuary today. You are not alone on this spiritual journey. The first way to bolster your spirit in this New Year is to consider the cloud of witnesses.

2—CONSIDER CHRIST’S PERFECTION

A second way of starting the New Year well spiritually is found in verses two and three. There the writer to the Hebrews tells us to consider Christ’s perfection. Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Jesus, the greatest super hero of all, endured the cross and disregarded its shame, so that he could joyfully take his seat next to the throne of God. Jesus endured the hostility of sinners and shed blood as the ultimate example of one whose trust in God allowed his spirit to rise above adversity. Jesus didn’t let hardship distract or derail him. Jesus kept his focus on the spiritual goal, and thus, he won the victory over sin and death.

When we consider Christ’s perfection, we find that his example has an amazing power to lift up our spirits to new heights and possibilities. Earlier in Hebrews—in chapter 4, verse 15—the writer said, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” In chapter 5, verse 9, Hebrews says, that, “having been made perfect, Jesus became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” Through the perfection of Christ, we can find an inspiration, a hope, and a means of salvation. We will find our spiritual health when set our eyes on Jesus, when we focus our lives around his life, and when we live in accordance with his teaching. “What would Jesus do?” is not just a dated saying on wrist bands. We will do well and be well spiritually when we consider Christ’s perfection.

3—CONSIDER CHILDREN'S DISCIPLINE

And then there's a third matter in this 12th chapter of Hebrews. We will start the New Year well spiritually when we consider children's discipline. In verses seven and following, the writer to the Hebrews indicated that, just like human parents must discipline their children, so God our Father disciplines us, "in order that we may share God's holiness." If we think that God is punishing us with too many trials and tribulations, then we should consider the children's discipline that Jesus himself had to endure. Hebrews 5:8 tells us that, "although Jesus was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered." Jesus didn't get off easy because he was the Son of God. No. "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission" (5:7).

In chapter 12, verse 11, we read the truth that "discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." When we consider children's discipline, we are reminded that God is our loving parent who wants to help us avoid mistakes and troubles in life. But if we run into suffering, we can certainly learn from it.

Here at First United Methodist Church, we have a mothers group that uses our building once a month. The other day, after the group had finished, one of the moms came into the office to talk to Brenda and me about something. Her little boy, about three years old, had no pants on. The mother explained that he had refused to use the little toilet we have in our nursery-preschool area. Instead, he had had an accident in his pants and so was having to go without his britches and would soon feel uncomfortably cold. The mother referred to it as "natural consequences." Not every kid learns well from the school of hard knocks, but many of us have learned some very important lessons that way.

Hebrews isn't saying that we should go looking for suffering. The writer is just saying that if suffering comes, we shouldn't get overly discouraged. We shouldn't throw in the spiritual towel. In verses 12 and 13, the writer uses athletic imagery again. After getting beat up, knocked down, or just plain worn

out, we may need to lift our drooping hands and strengthen our weak knees. We may need to make straight paths for our feet. We may need to put on some safety guards or splints and allow our lame spirits to heal. But we never should give up our faith. Instead, we should recognize that we're still children who have a lot to learn. We do still need direction and discipline. Sure, those consequences and struggles may hurt for the moment. But hardship does have the power to guide us toward the life that God our father wants for us. So, endure, my brothers and sisters. If you want to be well spiritually, consider children's discipline.

CONCLUSION

On January 13th, my husband Steve and I attended the Gospel Music Festival at Weber State University. That tribute to African American music and Christian faith included this song:

Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring
 Ring with the harmonies of liberty;
 Let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies,
 Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
 Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us;
 Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
 Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
 Let us march on till victory is won.³

That kind of spiritual victory is exactly what the writer to the Hebrews was aiming for in this twelfth chapter. If you're feeling the struggle of life and faith, then consider the cloud of witnesses, consider Christ's perfection, and consider children's discipline. Those are wonderful suggestions for starting the New Year well spiritually.

¹<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/get-your-spirit-in-shape>

²<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/get-your-spirit-in-shape-how-science-led-from-atheism-to-faith>

³James Weldon Johnson, c. 1921, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (1989), #519.