

January 1, 2017
New Year's Day

“For the Bible Tells Me So”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 ~ Revelation 21:1-6a ~ Matthew 25:31-46

I'm probably not the first, but I can be the next person to wish you Happy New Year! The start of a new year is always exciting. I guess the one I remember the most vividly was January 1st 2000. The hype prior to that event reached a fevered pitch. Y2K, as it became known, was supposed to bring a reign of terror ... planes crashing, banks closing, power failing, food and water running out, neighbors shooting each other over a can of spam. What was that about? Why all the hysteria and hoopla? Was it a highly effective marketing device for gas powered generators and bottled water? Was it a recognition of our deepening dependence on fragile technologies? Or was it an expression of our globalized anxiety about the unknown future?

But every year brings with it a variety of prognostication ... when the media finally turns from past to future ... with top ten lists of forecasts and predictions. Wondering about the future myself, I turned to the most reliable source for predictions I know, given their vast experience in the field, the *Weekly World News*. You may have seen this hallowed tabloid at the supermarket, but I looked it

up on the web. They have the news the other media misses, and they actually name themselves “the world’s most reliable newspaper.” When you read it online they really have a drop down tab labeled “Mutants.” I was alarmed to learn that one out of four UFO pilots is intoxicated, but that explains their diving and dipping ways of zipping around the skies. I was amused to hear that an alien has endorsed our president-elect ... that seemed a little odd to me because the World Weekly News declared in 1990 that Hilary Clinton had adopted an alien baby and they even had the pictures to prove it. But their predictions for the year 2017 made my hair stand on end.

According to them we're in for a hard year! Terrorism, assassination, blinding solar flares, disastrous tidal waves, killer viruses, devastating earthquakes, drought, record heat, record cold, and then, on August 8th a black hole will swallow the earth. It's just as well, because our sun is going to burn out in 2017 anyway. The headlines blaring from this paper are just priceless...Killer babies on the loose...honeymoon couple attacked by goldfish...and my personal favorite...the right diet will assure you a place in heaven.

It seems that any one can play this game so let me offer you my own list of predictions for the new year:

Scientists will discover a way to surgically implant smart phones in our heads so teenagers can text their friends even in their sleep.

Genetic engineering will eliminate bad hair days

Americans weary with diet fads will force the American Medical Association to revise its ideal weight standards by an increase of 25 pounds.

Membership in computer chat room churches will surpass membership in real churches and create a new software craze of virtual reality spirituality games.

Last names will fall by the wayside as parents start adding ".com" to their baby's names and registering their internet domain names as quickly as they are born.

And I predict that NASA scientists will announce they have discovered life on earth in a remote village in the Appalachians untouched by telephones, television, movies, or computers where families still talk to one another and neighbors visit on front porches.

Well, I would argue my list of predictions is at least as reasonable as any I've seen.

We are no better at forecasting things to come than the ancient priests who searched the entrails of goats looking for signs. The truth is, no one can predict the future nor guarantee its security. That's why we fear it. The future is out of our control. So much for the bad news.

The good news I have for you today is that the future is in the hands of a good and loving God. How can I be so sure ... "For the Bible tells me so" ... the Bible tell us what we can expect from the future ... not in the form of precise predictions ... so much as general truths that we can trust. Our scriptures today ... taken together ... offer us the Christian view of time ...and that's why we read all three.

First of all, the Bible says our lives are timed. As Ecclesiastes puts it: "*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.*" Under heaven is where we live. Forever is not a word that belongs to the human vocabulary. Eternity is the exclusive property of God. Our days and weeks and years are numbered, and we do well to keep ourselves in humble perspective before the inevitable march of time however we may choose to mark it. What's more, in the seasons of human life ... good things and bad things will happen.

There is: *a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;* (Ecc 3:2-4) and so on.

You can expect your share of joy and of sorrow ... of triumph and of suffering. Much of these are beyond your control and a part of human existence. It is what it is ... the stuff of life. Says Matthew Henry: "*To expect unchanging happiness in a*

changing world, must end in disappointment. To bring ourselves to our state in life, is our duty and our wisdom in this world."

This classic passage from Ecclesiastes is sobering and realistic. It cuts through denial and urges us to take responsibility ... to seize the moments of our lives for what they are without whining ... to live in the present moment fully without retreating to the past ... or postponing happiness for some uncertain future. Most of all it reminds us of our limits. You and I are merely mortal. This is the moment of life ... savor it. This is the time of salvation ... seize it.

By itself, Ecclesiastes would be a little depressing, because it essentially says there is no meaning to our lives beyond the simple fact that we are alive. But Ecclesiastes is not by itself. The Bible also envisions a future held by God, a "*new heaven and a new earth*" in which *...the home of God is among mortals ... (who) will dwell with them ... they will be (God's) peoples ...and God will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more ... mourning and crying and pain will be no more ...for the first things (will) have passed away.* (Rev. 21:2-5).

Again, forever is not a word that belongs to the human vocabulary. Eternity is the exclusive property of God. But God promises us participation in eternity through Jesus Christ our Lord. In this world there is no justice ... but God guarantees

justice in the world to come. In this world there is no peace ... but God guarantees peace in the world to come. In this world there is pain and sorrow ... but God guarantees there will be no pain or sorrow in the world to come for those who choose grace. Therefore our lives do have meaning and are of ultimate value ... not just to us ... but to God.

Mind you, this word of hope does not negate the word about time and humility in Ecclesiastes. We are still mortal and entirely dependent upon God. But in God we do have hope. We can trust in God.

But what does this word of a new heaven and a new earth ... held by God in our future ... do for us now? Do we ignore the future and leave it all to God? Is the heart of the biblical message pie in the sky when we die ... a salve to our conscience and opium for the masses? No! As Paul Tillich suggests ... when we realize we are timed by eternity our time becomes meaningful. "*When eternity calls in time, then pessimism vanishes.*" The hardships, sufferings, and toils of this life become part of our journey ... on the way to some place that God has prepared. They are our hard teachers. Says Tillich: "*When eternity times us, then time becomes a vessel of eternity. Then we become vessels of that which is eternal.*" Without God's eternity ... all our days and all our efforts are ... as the author of Ecclesiastes says, "vanity of vanities." It all adds up to nothing. But connected to God's eternity and God's values, what we do with our time prepares the way for "a

new heaven and a new earth." In Christ we understand, to use Tillich's phrase, "the ultimate significance of every moment."

I dare say few of us will be here for the beginning of the next century. But what we do now will impact this century ... and even the thirtieth centuries. We can take care of the earth so it will still be the good earth for generations to come. We can work for peace so the world will be safe for the future. We can be prophetic enough to demand that no one be left out of the prosperity and progress that has been enjoyed too often by the elite few in the past. By the grace and guidance of God we can use our now to make tomorrow better for everybody. Then our lives will not just be "a vanity of vanities."

Hence we hear the third scripture for this New Year. Ecclesiastes reminds us of our mortal limits. We have only so much time, and we must trust ourselves to God. The Apocalypse promises that trusting in God will bring us to a new heaven and a new earth in God's eternity. And Jesus tells us in Matthew how we should live in the meantime ... caring for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned, all of "the least of these" while we have time. The future that God promises calls us forward into newness ... transforms our past into useful lessons ... and fills the present with possibilities which can hasten the coming reign of God in peace and light.

I can't predict the future. The *Weekly World News* notwithstanding, no one can. But we need not fear ... even though difficulties and disasters will surely come. The future is in God's hands. And God loves us. God calls us to use our time to shape ourselves ... our community ... and our world ... for a new heaven and a new earth which God guarantees. Then let's get on with it, shall we? In the name of Christ. Amen. May we pray?

Eternal God,

You alone can determine what the rising sun will bring. You alone have been here from the beginning and will be here for each new millennium to come. But we are mortal, weak, and frail. Therefore we move into the future with a mixture of fear and hope. Let us be guided by our hope. Let us trust in you. Let us be about your work as long as you give us breath and prepare our souls for what you hold in store for us after. Use our time ... use our lives ... to bring your grace into every life we touch in Jesus' name. Amen.