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Scripture: Romans 8: 14-19

GETTING AN EGG FOR CHRISTMAS, WIND IN THE FACE OF A SENATOR, AND THE FINAL WORDS OF A PRESIDENT

This New Year's Eve I am looking forward to watching them drop the ball in Time Square. It will remind me of what I did all year – dropped the ball! And what a year it has been. With all the challenges and heartaches of 2020, if you are like me it is no wonder that we are filled with fear and anxiety. I can't wait to see 2020 in the rearview mirror; I just want for all this insanity to stop. But the question is, how do we do that? How do we recapture where we were a year ago? What is it we need to do to move forward? If you were to identify one thing you could do to make 2021 a good year for this country, what would you choose?

Some years ago, Dr. Robert Hutchins was the Chancellor of the University of Chicago and he made an observation that does a good job of describing our present situation. He said, "The great problem of our time is moral, intellectual and spiritual. With a super abundance of goods, we are sinking into poverty. With a magnitude of gadgets, we are no happier now than we were before. With medicine and lifestyles giving us longer lives, we have yet to discover what to do with our lives. With a love of liberty, we see many people around us in chains." He concludes by saying, "There is no true hope for a better world without a new spirit." What he is saying is we need to create a better spirit among people.

I think the Scripture lesson we read this morning has something very important to say about this. Writing to the Romans Paul said: "If the spirit of God is leading you, then take comfort in knowing you are His children." And then Paul says, "For all of creation is waiting, yearning for the time when the children of God will be revealed." This scripture speaks to me. I believe this country is waiting for the children of God to be revealed. Think about that. God has made us His children. The world, this country, is waiting for the children of God to be revealed. I hear Paul saying, "This country is waiting for us who have been called to be God's children to begin living as God's children." What this country needs most in 2021 is for you and for me and for all people to truly live as the children of God.

What does it mean to live as a child of God? First, children of God are people who are committed to God and to his Kingdom. Children of God are people of total commitment. When we become totally committed to something, we accept no excuses for failure – we seek only results. What is it that you are totally committed to? In college one of my philosophy professors asked this question: "To whom or to what do you owe your ultimate allegiance?" Then he stated, "What you are committed to will define the kind of life you will lead." We have to look at ourselves and ask, what am I committed to? Is my commitment to fulfilling my own pleasure, my own fun, my own enjoyment, or am I committed to others? We must ask ourselves, "What is it in my life that am I committed to that is larger than myself?"

I want to share with you a gift Winona and I received from Pat Bishop which was totally unexpected but is a gift we have truly treasured. Take a look at this beautiful egg painted by a

Russian artist named Titiana Romonova Grant. Pat tells me that in 2001 her son Barry had offices in the World Trade Center in New York. Fortunately, he was not in the building when the attack came on September 11. Barry was transferred to an office in San Francisco and while at a cultural event he met Titiana. They became friends and several years later they met in Chicago and she gave Barry this egg. Barry died several years ago and Pat and Tillie received this egg. It is a beautiful gift. During the artist's career, she created masterpieces in the ancient Byzantine and Russian art forms. Through her artistry she created icons, miniatures, frescos and eggs using techniques first developed in the 12th century. A collection of her art is located in the Prophet Elias Orthodox Church in Santa Cruz, CA. This egg is a beautiful work of art that shows the life of Christ from his birth to his resurrection. This scene is a closeup of the angel speaking to Mary. This shows the baby in the manger, and this scene shows three men riding on horses and we believe these depict the three wisemen.

Last Sunday Pastor Steve talked about the story of the wise men. You recall the story. According to Matthew, the Magi arrived from the east. They came from far away to pay homage to the new born king. In Matthew's story he does not say how many travelers there were nor does he tell us where in the "east" they came from. Some scholars conclude there may have been more than three wise men and that they likely came from Persia, or even as far away as China. We often think of the Magi arriving at the manger in Bethlehem but in Matthew 2:11 we read that the wise men found Jesus in his home with his mother. Some sources I read conclude Jesus may have been as old as two years when they arrived. If they came from Persia, or even China, it is possible these visitors from the east traveled up to two years to find Jesus.

We also think of the visitors riding camels, but at the time of the birth of Christ, most people walked wherever they went. The merchant class often rode camels but the elites of society, such as the magi, rode horses, and if they came from Persia, the horses would have been Arabians. So at least on this egg the artist shows the magi riding on horses.

Regardless of whether they came from Persia or even China, it is clear they traveled a long distance. This journey required a total commitment to stop whatever they were doing in their everyday lives. They put their lives on hold and prioritized their time, energy, and efforts to travel a long distance to be in close proximity to Jesus.

The story told by Matthew is a story about the magi who made a total commitment to travel a very long distance to present their precious gifts to the new King. It is a story of total commitment where children of God were revealed. In Philippians Paul writes: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look to the interests of others." The story of the magi is a story of commitment to others; a story of bringing our gifts and service to others.

I read a story about the Texas A&M Corps of Cadets. It is the largest, oldest and most visible student organization and leadership training program at Texas A&M. An interesting custom has evolved over the years. During football games the Corps of Cadets stand for the entire game. It seems that in 1922 the team went to another town to play a game and took only a small group of players. As the game progressed, a number of players got hurt and the coach ran out of football

players. He went into the stands and recruited some cadets, put football uniforms on them and sent them out to play. Well, ever since that time all of the Cades at the A&M games remain standing during the entire game as a symbol that they are behind their team, that they are committed to them and they are ready to go out and play if they are called. Total commitment. The country is waiting for us who are God's children to begin living in total commitment to Him and His Kingdom. Our call is to live in obedience to Him, to be ready at a moment's notice to serve Him, and to speak up for Him and be committed to do God's will.

And then to live as a child of God is to be a person of integrity in every area of our lives. Integrity is the quality of being honest, to live with strong moral principles and with moral uprightness. A person of integrity has the courage to say "No", the courage to face the truth and the courage to do the right thing because it is the right thing. We are called to live with integrity in our business life, in our family life, in our recreation life, wherever we are we are called to live a life of integrity. One time a teacher asked a little boy in her class, "Is the world flat?" He said, "No." She asked, "Is it square?" He said, "No." She asked, "Is it round?" He said, "No". The teacher was puzzled and asked, "Well, what is it?" He said, "My Dad says it is crooked." It is a crooked world, full of crooked people. The same is true of this country. We have a lot of crooked people. How many of you receive scam calls or scam emails from crooked people who only want to take your money? This country is waiting for some people to live with integrity in every area of their lives, who will seek every moment of every day to do what is right in the eyes of the Lord. We cry out for our family, our friends, our neighbors, our leaders to be people of integrity.

In the story of Don Quixote, that crazy knight errant did a lot of goofy things. But he was also a very kind person. He treated his kitchen woman, Aldonza, as though she were a queen. He even gave her a new name. He called her Lady Dulcinea. At one point in the story, Dulcinea asks Don Quixote, "Why do you do these crazy things?" He says, "to add some measure of grace to the world, to add some measure of goodness and honesty and decency to the world."

Peter Marshall tells of an experience he had back in the 1930's when he was serving as Chaplain of the U.S. Senate. A man was appointed to fill the unexpired term of a Senator who had died. This man came in to see Marshall one day and shared with him his dilemma. He said, "I was appointed to fill an unexpired term of this senator but when I got here, the powerful and influential people back home said that I could remain here only as long as I voted the way they wanted me to vote. But there are times when votes come up and I am caught in a dilemma because I know how they want me to vote but I think it's wrong." He went on to say, "Just once I would like to be free. Just once I would like to stand on some high hill of moral responsibility and feel the wind in my face." Peter Marshall said to him, "Well, you can. The next time one of those moral issues come up you ask yourself, 'How would the Lord want me to vote?' and you vote that way no matter what the people back home say. Then you'll feel the wind in your face." Some time later just such a vote came on the floor. A "yes" vote would benefit a few, powerful and wealthy people but it would hurt thousands of others. There was a roll call in the Senate and Marshall was there to hear the vote. They called the name of this senator and Marshall heard a resounding "No". Marshall writes, "I could see him standing on that high hill of moral responsibility with the wind in his face."

This country is waiting for the children of God to be revealed. This country is waiting for you and me to stand up on those high hills of integrity and speak out for what is right. That is what we need in 2021. A different country cannot be built by indifferent people. May we think of freedom, not as the right to do as we please, but as the opportunity to do what is right. We are called to be people of integrity.

And finally, to be a child of God is to be a person who is full of hope. We live in a country where there is a lot of pessimism. 2020 has been a difficult year. We have been separated from our friends and families. We have been bombarded by false narratives from all directions. We have become wary of believing anything. We don't know where to turn for accurate and honest information. As we leave 2020, there are so many challenges facing us that it is easy for us to be negative, pessimistic and cynical. But through our faith we can sort out the background noise and we can be people of hope.

Rene Dubos is a man who made some outstanding achievements in the field of microbiology. Dubos writes about a mysterious force he calls, "the God Within." He sees this force at work throughout the world. The working of this force in the world gives Dubos great hope for the world. He says, "Despite the suffering and despair, the ugliness created by racial conflicts, national rivalries, food shortages and pollution, the bells of Christmas always lift me on waves of hope."

On April 3, 1945, President Roosevelt was at his cottage at Warm Springs, Georgia, where a porch had been designed to resemble the prow of a ship, giving the paralyzed president the illusion of movement, of freedom. That day Roosevelt worked on a speech he was scheduled to deliver on Saturday, April 13, 1945, on the occasion of Thomas Jefferson's birthday. He died the day before the speech was to be delivered. A portion of that speech reads: "Today, science has brought all the different quarters of the globe so close together that it is impossible to isolate them one from another. Today we are faced with the preeminent fact that, if civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships – the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together and work together in the same world, at peace...." Roosevelt continued: "The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today. Let us move forward with strong and active faith that we can and will cultivate a culture of hope." In a way, these were his last words.

Martin Luther King preached perhaps his most famous speech which was based on Chapter 40, verse 4 from the Book of Isaiah: King said: "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and every mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." He paused and then pressed on: "This is our hope. This is the faith that I carry with me. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope."

In the Christian Believer study series, the following statement appears: "Wherever good is happening in the world, that is the spirit of Jesus working." Whenever we do good, we are doing God's work. In the Book of Micah we read, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

This country is waiting for the children of God to be revealed. We need to decide this morning that we will be the children of God, totally committed to Him and His Kingdom, standing on high moral hills with the wind in our face speaking words of hope to those who are down and need help to get up. The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today. Let us move forward with a strong and active faith. A village in India was suffering from a severe drought. One day all the villagers gathered together to pray for rain; but only one boy came with an umbrella. That is commitment, that is faith, that is hope. That is what this country needs most in 2021.