

By Gracious Powers wonderfully sheltered
Colossians 3:12-17

“How was your 2021?”

Did you have a good Christmas? Yes. For many pastors, their Christmas this year may not have been a relaxing one. Juhee and I had a small celebration of Christmas at home in the morning, and we worked during the afternoon because Sunday was coming. Working on Christmas Day was “Not bad” because it meant the busiest season for pastors is coming to an end. It also means that the end of 2021 is near. How was your 2021? I actually asked the same question a year ago in my sermon, but of course, I could not hear your answers because all of you were at home while I preached to a camera. Although I cannot see your faces, I am glad that at least I can see your eyes and hear from you this year. 2021 was not an easy year for us. Covid-19 is still ravaging the world, and the deep political division within our society has not yet healed. Hate crimes against people of color have sharply risen as well as gun violence. The Omicron variant, inflation, climate change... 2021 was not an easy year.

But no matter how it was, a new year is coming. Each year, God gives us a new canvas to draw our life stories. That’s a blessing. Will 2022 be better than 2021? We don’t know yet, but we know that God will continue to walk with us as God had walked with us throughout 2021. Because God is with us, we can welcome the coming of the new year.

Let me share a beautiful hymn. When Covid-19 first hit us in 2019, I happened to hear this hymn, and this song comforted me and soothed my soul. The name of the hymn is “By Gracious Powers Wonderfully Sheltered.” [ppt] This is a beautiful song. The lyric of this song is a poem written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in December of 1944, just eight weeks before he was executed. He was in prison because of his involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler. He had already been locked in jail for two years, just like our lives have been restrained by Covid-19 for two years. He did not know what tomorrow would bring, just as we do not today. However, with trust in God, Bonhoeffer wrote this beautiful New Year prayer. “By gentle powers lovingly surrounded / With patience we’ll endure, let come what may / God is with us at night and in the morning / And certainly on every future day” Today is the last Sunday of 2021. 2021 was a year filled with worry and anxiety. It was a year when we felt frightened and under siege by the Covid-19 virus and the virus of hatred. It was not an easy year, and we don’t know what 2022 will bring, but we can face tomorrow unafraid because God is with us, and God’s gracious powers shelter us. We are ready for 2022.

What do you do to prepare for the new year?

New Year is coming, so what do you usually do to prepare for the new year? What New Year’s Day traditions do you have? I have lived in the United States for 13 years, but I still don’t know much about American New Year traditions, so I googled it. [ppt] The results showed, “Watch the Times Square Ball Drop,” “Pop Champaign and make a toast.” “Count down the seconds to midnight... and share a special New Year’s Eve kiss!” Is this information correct? I was particularly interested in the last one, and so researched further. Some say, “This tradition stems from the belief that kissing someone at midnight will prevent loneliness during the coming year and ward off evil spirits!” Interesting. Each culture has interesting New Year’s traditions.

Korea also has its own New Year’s Day traditions. [ppt] On New Year’s day, family members gather together and eat a special dish called “Rice Cake Soup.” It is believed that eating rice cake soup on New Year’s Day will grant the people good luck in the coming year.

Another tradition is wearing a set of specially prepared new clothes, called “Seolbim” and offering a ceremonious greeting, Sebae, to parents and grandparents! “Sebae is the act of kneeling on the ground and bowing deeply so that your hands are also on the ground. Younger people bow deeply to their elders and wish them a happy new year. This traditional bow signifies respect and gratitude to older family members.” Young children like sebae because grandparents and parents give them gift money after they receive sebae. So on New Year’s Day, the family gathers in their new clothes, sharing a special meal and exchanging their first greetings of best wish for the new year. While each culture has different New Year’s Day customs, there is also a common theme of blessings for the new year, and practices such as wearing new clothes for new days.

Wear New Spiritual Clothes!

As we prepare for 2022, Apostle Paul also recommends us to wear new spiritual clothes. “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” Compassion, kindness, humility, patience, and forgiveness. They are new spiritual clothes for Christians to wear. In ancient Roman society, what people wore represented who they were. For the Christmas Eve worship service, I wore a clergy collar. If I wear my clergy collar at a grocery store or a restaurant, people will know who I am even though they are not our church members. At the same time, I would be more careful about what I do because people will know who I am by what I am wearing.

As I prepare this sermon, I imagined what would happen if there is specific Christian clothes that all Christians have to wear all the time. Christians will be more conscious about who they are and they will become more mindful of what they are doing. If all Christians in the world consciously practice their Christian faith, the world will be a better place than today since 31 % of the world’s population are Christians. Of course, we don’t have Christian cloth but there are spiritual clothes that we need to wear: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and love. If all Christians always wear these spiritual clothes, the world will certainly be a better place.

As we move toward 2022, clothe ourselves with new spiritual clothes with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Of course, it’s easy to know but hard to practice. Love is not easy. Especially, love in action is difficult because it’s not only hard but also our good intentions do not always turn out as we expected. A friend of mine let a church member, who was homeless, stay at his home. He had good intentions to help this young man and share Christian love with his brother in Christ. I admire his love and hospitality. However, this young man was an alcoholic and narcotic addict. While they made rules for not doing these things, he didn’t abide by the rules. One day, the man was drunk, yelling and breaking furniture and eventually, the police had to be called to get him out of the house.

Sometimes, our love in action does not work. Love is difficult because we cannot control it. Frederick Buechner says, “Of all powers, love is the most powerful and the most powerless. It is the most powerful because it alone can conquer that final and most impregnable stronghold which is the human heart. It is the most powerless because it can do nothing except by consent.” Loving is hard because we can’t control the outcome. But we still need to wear this most powerful and powerless garment because this is the way that bridges all differences that bind us as one body of Christ.

Paul reminds us that we are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. Compassion, kindness, humility, patience, forgiveness are spiritual clothes we should wear. How can we wear them? In 2022, try to first see the good in whomever you meet. Listen more carefully to other people's stories with empathy. Don't be judgmental, but try to embrace them as they are. Be more patient with others. As we wear these wonderful spiritual clothes, we will also find that we have been wonderfully sheltered by the gracious power of God. My friends, I pray that God's love and grace may continue to embrace you and guide you on your way. Happy New Year! Amen.