

How Do We Fit Into God's Plans?

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

January 1, 2023 – A Conversational Message on New Year's Day

Text: Isaiah 43:1-2; 18-19

Happy New Year! It is indeed a rare opportunity for us to gather in worship to reflect together on the beginning of another New Year. I'm not sure what your New Year's celebrations are like these days but ours have changed substantially over the years. When we were young, Peter and I would "dress to the nines" and head out for a late dinner followed by dancing and ringing in the New Year with other club goers. This proved to be a much less satisfying experience than we had imagined so we only did it a few times. Then, we went through a few years of attending a crazy New Year's Party hosted by some folks I worked with in the suburbs of Washington, DC. The party started at 6pm with a toast to the New Year wherever it was already the New Year. Then this continued every hour on the hour. Now, that was a party. Ridiculous amounts of food and copious amounts of alcohol. Only did that one twice as well. After children arrived, everything changed of course. New Years involved traveling to grandparents for visits or local trips to keep them occupied on the school breaks. When they hit college age, we returned to going out for a few years as First Night was fun. But, elevating costs and frigid temps brought those years to a quick conclusion. Now Peter and I usually spend New Years doing nothing special which, after weeks of being way too busy, is our favorite to welcome the New Year. *What are some of the ways you have celebrated New Years over the years?*

Some churches do offer New Year's Eve services and I have often wondered about trying to do one here. But, I know even in large churches the New Years Eve services are very sparsely attended making the effort needed to pull one off seeming like a poor use of my time for sure. I've always wanted to attend a "Watch Night" service on

New Year's Eve – that's a service held from 11pm – 12:30am for the specific purpose of praying the New Year into existence but alas that remains an item on my bucket list. All this is why I am so very pleased we can gather together this New Year's morning to spend some time in conversation with God and each other about the possibilities this New Year holds for us as individuals, as families and as a congregation.

The context for our conversations this morning is provided by the prophet Isaiah in some of my favorite verses in the entire Bible. These words come to us from Second Isaiah, written to the people who were enmeshed in the Babylonian Captivity following the fall of Jerusalem. He was writing to people whose entire lives had been upended. They were despairing of where God had been in all this disastrous mess that had become their lives. Isaiah told them exactly where they would find God which was right in the middle of everything that was happening. He begins by reminding them that God had not forgotten them nor abandoned them. In fact, just the opposite was the case: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” Isaiah was telling them, and is telling us, that God is always calling us forward, out of the challenges and worries that weigh us down. God is always ready to reveal to us a new way forward. And how does God do this? Isaiah explains: “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

So that is our challenge for this morning, dear ones. I would like to ask us to join in conversation together to wonder together how we might answer these questions Isaiah suggests God is asking us as this New Year begins:

1) What new thing do you think God might be doing in your life? In the church's life?

2) How might be God be a part of your life in new ways?

Let's take 10 minutes to talk among ourselves about these questions, and then share together any thoughts that bubble to the surface from our mutual ponderings.

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Thank you so much for your willingness to do some New Year reflecting together! May God guide us forward through these insights offered! Amen.