Welcome to all of you, and Happy New Year! It is so meaningful to meet for worship on the first day of the New Year and, since today is a communion Sunday, to share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. It is a nice way to start a new year!

Let me ask you a question. Did last year, 2016, bring what you expected? Was it what you thought it would be? Was it what you hoped it would be? Was it better? Was it worse? Were there any surprises, anything you didn’t anticipate? Did any of these surprises change your life in a significant way?

Actually, that’s seven questions. But that’s ok. All seven questions distill down into one basic theme. At the beginning of every New Year we step forward into the unknown.

Most of us would admit that this past year brought more than its share of unknowns, more than its share of unpredicted happenings. Some of these unknowns were difficult or painful to bear; some still are. But we need to acknowledge that there were also unexpected joys, times when something really nice happened. We need to remember these as well.

Heck, this stepping forth into the unknown not only happens every New Year; it happens every day! When we wake up every morning, we step forth into a new and unpredictable world!

The New Year is a time to think back over the year that has passed. It is a time to reflect on what happened in our nation and the world, on what didn’t happen, and try to understand the events that shaped not only our lives but also the lives of our brothers and sisters. It is also a time to reflect on our own moments of joy and moments of sadness, our experience of health and our struggles with illness, the things that went well and the things that did not go well, the relationships that are still an important part of our lives and the losses that touched us so deeply.

This arbitrarily designated liminal space between the years is a time to look back, but it is also a time to look forward. What will happen to us, to our family, to our country in the coming year? What will happen to our church? We know deep down that no matter how carefully we plan the future, we cannot control it. The only thing certain about the future is its uncertainty.
The certainty of uncertainty brings with it a feeling of vulnerability. Some people escape from this uncomfortable feeling by regarding every single event, no matter how accidental it may seem, as a part of God’s master plan. If you believe this, then you have a ground to stand on when illness or tragedy strikes—the conviction that the accident, illness, tragedy, or death is purposeful and is in accordance with God’s will.

Other people cannot adopt this theological stance. They cannot bring themselves to believe that God wills the death of little children, accidents that snatch our loved ones from us, illnesses that impact our quality of life, or wars that wreak havoc upon innocent civilians. These people would rather live in a world where free will, accident, and fate play a role than to believe in a God who micromanages the universe.

As you know, I find myself in theological sympathy with the second group. As strange as it sounds, I believe we can trust in a God who allows bad things to happen to good people, who allows the precious gift of free will to play its role in human affairs, and who does not prevent or forbid accidents, illnesses, and tragedies. If God does not predetermine the course of human events, then we humans are empowered to be co-creators with God. At least we can change the present, and in changing the present we can change the future. A great big part of life is up to us, not only in what happens to us but also in how we respond to it.

We need to understand the factors that lay beneath the events of the past year, for many of them did not come out of nowhere. We also need to look ahead. We need a vision to guide our unfolding as individuals, as a church, and as a nation. I believe that God not only plants the vision of a healthy and meaningful life within us; God is working to make that vision a reality.

The book of Exodus describes the arduous journey of the ancient Israelites as they traveled through the wilderness. They had just left Egypt where they were slaves. They embarked upon their journey with a vision planted in their hearts, a vision of a land of their own. The Israelites were known as the Children of the Promise: God’s promise that if they would be his people, he would be their God. God promised that they would have a land, an identity of their own. The Israelites wandering in the wilderness had not yet seen the fruits of this promise. All they saw was the seemingly endless hardships of living in the wilderness.

Time and time again, the Israelites were tempted to turn back. At least in Egypt, though they were not free, they had had enough to eat. They had no idea what the future would bring.
What if it brought only hardship? The promise of new life at times must have seemed hollow. Was it all just the delusional ramblings of an eccentric prophet with a speech impediment, a man who heard voices and saw burning bushes that were not consumed?

Moses, their leader, was a visionary. He saw what the average Israelite could not see. He saw the Promised Land that awaited them if only they would persevere. He knew how the hardships of life in the wilderness were shaping them, how the hot desert sun was tempering the steel of their spirit. He knew that in their moments of weakness they would like to go back to their old life, to their old way of being, but he also knew this would betray their deeper call. Moses called his people to go forward.

Like the ancient Israelites, we, too, are children of the promise. God calls us forth into the future. God calls us forth into new life. God is continually trying to create something new in us, and God is continually trying to create something new in the world through us. God also promises that no matter what the coming year will bring, we will not have to face it alone.

When we fail to think of life as a process that must be envisioned and then lived forward, we become a victim of the present and a captive of our past. When this happens, life stagnates and begins to slip backward. This is true of us as individuals, and it is also true of our church.

Our church has carried out its ministry to this community for over 150 years. We have a deep and meaningful history. Our little church has touched the lives of many people, many families. It has been a center for worship and spiritual growth. It has created the kind of fellowship that I imagine characterized the very first Christian gatherings. It has been a presence for good in our community. And for over 150 years it has reached out to those in need.

Even as we look back in gratitude, we know that we also need to look forward. We need to live forward into the creation of a healthy and vibrant church, a church that celebrates its past, but which is also deeply committed to moving forward into an unknown future.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said that it is impossible to step twice into the same river. When I first read this, I thought he meant that the river is always flowing, always changing. It is the same river, but it is also and at the same time a brand new river. This is the way it is with time.

Then I realized that Heraclitus was not only talking about the river; he was also talking about us. I am the same person that I was yesterday, but I am also and at the same time a brand
new person. So I am a brand new person stepping into a brand new river. This is the way it is with life. Everything is constantly changing.

Let me return to our original questions. Do you think that the coming year, 2017, will bring what you expect? Will there be any surprises, anything you didn’t anticipate? Do you think that some of these surprises will change your life in a significant way?

At the beginning of every New Year we step forward into the unknown. We do this as individuals, as families, as a church, and as a nation. In this coming year, let us pray for that spirit which will not shrink from the unknown, but will lead us forward into the future. To create this future we will need the courage to put our hand to the plow and not look back. We will need the conviction that if we can be true to the vision has been implanted within us by God we will help to create the future. Above all, we need to remember that we do not walk this way alone.

M. Louise Haskins reminds us of this truth in her poem “At the Gate of the Year.”

> And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:  
> "Give me a light, that I may tread safely into the unknown."  
> And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.  
> That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."  
> And he led me toward the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.  
> So heart, be still.  
> What need our little life, our human life, to know if God hath comprehension?  
> In all things high and low, God hideth His intention.

We do not have a crystal ball to tell us what will happen to us in the coming year. This is why we need to put our hand into the hand of God. This is why we need to put our lives into the hand of God. We need to let God guide us and help unfold the vision he has for us, for our church, for our nation, and for the world.

If we do this, beginning with our communion service this morning, on New Year’s Day, we will be able to discover new and creative possibilities in the year to come and within that great unknown that we call the future.

A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
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