

“Time Capsules...” – New Year’s day
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Happy New Year.

Another year over, and a *new* one just begun. Some of us ended 2016 with celebration at the New Year’s event here at the church last night – an event that my Michelle has loved and nurtured over the past three years. Some of us ended 2016 with some amount of consternation, as we’ve looked back at the difficult events of the past 12 months.

And now our attention shifts to 2017, and we hold fast to hope while the mystery of this new year unfolds. As Cherry read from her poem: “Some years are easier seen in the rearview mirror, and some daunting to face head on.”

The horizon isn’t quite clear. The future is murky; change is there. For some of us – for Michelle and me – change is already here.

I have packed a lot of boxes over the past few weeks. So many boxes. Boxes at the house. Boxes at the office. Boxes for the thrift store that our church shares with Trinity. I packed boxes to ship to friends – forgotten items left unintentionally during visits to the Shoreline house. *And*, I packed boxes to move back East.

I packed the first boxes very carefully. I intentionally sorted and placed every item that filled them. There wasn’t a cubic inch wasted in those first few. By the end, however, I was hefting things in great armloads and dumping them in; I walked by counters and shelves using my arm like a bulldozer. I think the last box I packed had shampoo, a few bottles of diet Pepsi, an early draft of my Christmas Eve sermon, a box of Thai takeout with a half a Banh Mi Sandwich, the dish rack with dishes still drying in it,

and a cell phone charger. [I probably should have saved out the cell phone charger, maybe the Banh Mi, too.]

There were hopes and dreams of many years packed in those boxes; there was probably some shame, too. The shame of seeing the vast amount of things one can collect in a lifetime of relative privilege. The shame of recognizing things purchased but seldom or never used.

There were a lot of boxes.

How many boxes do you think you've packed over the course of your lifetime?

Once the boxes are packed, and sealed; once the contents are marked and the waste discarded, we might stand back, look at it all, and think: "This is me; this has been my life." We find remnants and artifacts of who we once were interspersed with newer, fresher memories of a more recent past.

Then, eventually, it's time to settle into a new place and open ourselves to new experiences... but first, of course, we have to *unpack*.

I think unpacking is like opening time capsules. Letters, photos, t-shirts and even mugs often memorialize moments in our lives. When I dig down into these time capsules, as I will in a few weeks, it's not the *things* themselves that carry the emotional weight – it's the stories I associate with them.

Stories transcend all manner of things. The items might occupy space, but our stories occupy time. And, *time* – especially the time we share – is ultimately more sacred than stuff. That's not to say that I have a bias about the importance of our stories... but, you know I do.

The stories we tell allow us to travel through time. They allow us to celebrate cherished memories, to remember friends and family whom we've lost. Ideally, they help us remember the mistakes of the past and prevent us from reliving them. I've talked a lot about stories over the years, and this is my final chance to remind you what I've said once or twice in the past.

In a way, we participate in a sacred act of time travel every Sunday when we gather to remember the stories relayed to us through the Gospel narratives. This morning Aaron read to us from the book of Luke. It's a story about shepherds. It's a story about an angel who appears to them; it's a story about their awe, their joy, their journey – and ultimately a story about the shepherds leaving Bethlehem to tell the *story* of what they had seen to “all whom they met.”

Their story is one so charged with import that we still tell it today; we still celebrate it; we still point to it and all that it represented and all that it represents; we read ourselves into this story – we find God's hope *and God's presence* in this story.

And like heavy boxes full of treasured things, we are still *unpacking* the shepherds' story. As we sift through its contents, we might recognize that the angel addresses us, as well.

“Do not be afraid.”

Do not be afraid.

If you crack open the time capsules of your stories in this community, you will find the same gifts present in the Advent candles burning brightly just one week ago. If you open up these stories, Seattle First Baptist Church, you will be met with the Holy gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love. If you crack open the time capsules of your stories, I

believe you will find the Christ candle occupying and illuminating your inner-most places. You have 146 years of incredible history – which is totally accessible by the stories you tell.

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Now, I say this very gently: It is a past *worthy* of remembering; it is *not* a past you should live in.

These are memories too valuable to forget, but remembering them cannot come at the expense of the stories written today.

Sometimes stories become an escape, or they become palaces where our memories of things that *were* overshadow the actuality of things that are, in reality, happening right now.

In fact, there is a story unfolding today in this church – one that few other churches in this nation can tell. For nearly eight years Tim has encouraged you to consider this place a spiritual *home*. Remember you talk about having three High-Holy days at Seattle First Baptist: Christmas, Easter, and Homecoming. Discerning the sacred dimension of home has created space for this congregation to identify its most authentic expression of self. It is this authenticity that has become a beacon for young adults and families to find and make their own spiritual home within these walls.

As I said, you are seeing something happen in your midst that almost no other church is experiencing when it gathers: You are becoming younger.

Families are joining your membership; children are being introduced to authentic expressions of faith. Four or five years ago there were times when we could go two, sometimes three weeks without seeing a single child in worship. It has now been three

years since we had a week without a child's presence. There is a Spirit of life, a Spirit of vitality manifesting within these walls. There is something happening here that is worth talking about. I won't be around to tell this story for you any longer. So, it's up to you to tell it now.

It is a story of change, growth, evolution. And, yes, there are moments when change may feel uncertain, even threatening. In those moments, I encourage you to remember the words of the angel: "Do not be afraid." There is a new story being written in your very midst. Like the shepherds it is time to go and tell everyone you meet what you have seen and experienced here. It could be this community's most authentic form of evangelism.

When you say, "We are a community committed to intergenerational programming and worship," you are speaking *today's* truth in love.

You are living in your *love story* right now.

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To quote the great theologian Paul Roby: "Love is best served with food." As a Christian community, your greatest love story is told around this table on the first Sunday of every month. The stories of your *history* are told in Fellowship Hall and every Wednesday at dinner; the *new stories* of your *aspirations* and dreams are now told by children and parents over bagels and coffee during family fellowship hour before worship.

The most important part of your identity isn't who you were yesterday or who you'll try to be tomorrow; it is who you are today.

These are your ongoing love stories. And love, well, love is best served with food.

With that in mind, it is time to raise our cup of kindness – to lift up and share the cup of blessing and the bread of life and embrace a New Year. Because Jesus broke bread with friends: this is the love story to which all other love stories point – this is the meal to which all other meals beckon us toward.

And Michelle and I get to break this bread with you one final time, while welcoming in a New Year full of new stories for all of us. Each of you has played a role in one of the best stories either of us has ever known. Though we will not end this year with you, we are honored to begin it with you – our friends; our family.

Like this hymn we are about to sing, [...] we ask, “Nourish us with *sacred story* till we claim it as our own; teach us through this holy banquet how to make Love’s victory known.”

How, my friends, how is Love’s Victory made known to you today? How will you make it known this year? How – like the shepherds – how will you go out and tell every person you meet what you have seen and heard at Seattle First Baptist Church?

My sincere hope is that your recognition of Love’s victory in this place will generate new narratives, which will inspire all of you to become storytellers.

May that be so.

Happy New Year.