

HAPPY NEW YEARS

Two days before Christmas, a woman sat in her home, smugly reviewing all she had ready for the 25th. Her Christmas tree stood tall and full of ornaments; she had all of her presents wrapped; all of the food she needed was in the refrigerator.

But suddenly, it dawned on the woman that she hadn't sent out Christmas cards. Somehow, this task got overlooked in all the busyness of December.

Undaunted, the woman ran out to the drugstore and grabbed a couple of identical boxes, already marked half off, without bothering to read the inscription. She quickly paid for them, ran home, signed and addressed about 50 cards, rushed to the post office and got them into that day's outgoing mail.

On Christmas morning, the woman was relaxing with a cup of coffee when she noticed her box of cards lying on her table. I wonder what cheery Christmas message I had sent to my friends, she thought as she picked up the card. Imagine her shock and dismay when she read, "This is just a note to say, a little gift is on its way. Merry Christmas." Guess we all know what the woman was doing the day after Christmas!

We have just finished a season that for all of its joy, peace and love entailed a lot of work. There were homes to clean, presents to buy, gifts to wrap, cards to send, meals to fix, places to travel. In hindsight, was all of our work worth it? Did we enjoy what we did or do we begin 2012 with a sense of frustration that our work was for naught?

The book of Ecclesiastes has a lot to say about work and its place in our lives. As we begin a New Year, it might be good to review the words of Ecclesiastes and get his perspective on the proper way to live not only in the New Year but in all of our years ahead.

The author of this Old Testament book is never revealed, but most authorities believe it was King Solomon. Those who disagree point out that the Book of Proverbs was definitely from King Solomon's hand. And Proverbs is very upbeat: It clearly says we have full control over our destiny. If we live good lives, God will bless us with health, wealth and family. And if we are evil, God is going to punish us.

Not so in Ecclesiastes, where the writer says, "The rain falls on the good and the bad alike." In Chapter 7, he says the day of death is better than the day of birth, and it is better to attend a funeral than a party. Not your Hallmark-card kind of greeting.

However, I'm among those who believe King Solomon wrote both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Proverbs was most likely written while the king was very young, full of optimism over his strengths and abilities, and without any thought about death. In contrast, Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes when he was much older, after he had experienced all of its ups and downs, and was contemplating the end of his life. For that reason, I don't see Ecclesiastes as a pessimistic book; I see it as realistic.

Consider the start to Chapter 3: To everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. A time to be born, and to die; a time to weep and to laugh; a time to love and a time to hate. In other words, everything – even killing, hate and war – has a time when it may be appropriate in given circumstances. And there is comfort in knowing even in the midst of those hard times of our lives, they don't last. We may be weeping and mourning, but we will eventually return to seasons of laughing and dancing again.

We can control how we live in the bad times of life knowing they won't last. The one thing we can't control, however, is what time it is. Only God controls the seasons. Rather than

being dismayed by this fact, consider what King Solomon says in verse 14: "I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him."

In other words, the king's primary reason for sharing his thoughts in Ecclesiastes is to underscore the difference between God and us. What God does lasts forever. Whatever we do is impermanent. We have limited time, and therefore we should make the most of it. Instead of working for the hope of accumulating things, we should work for the enjoyment work brings.

As we enter 2012, this thought alone should spark some New Year's resolutions worth keeping. We should ask ourselves, are we working and living for the right things? And if not, now is the time to change.

In 768 AD, Charlemagne was made king of the Franks, and then from 800 to his death in 814, he was the Emperor of the Romans. When he died, his body was put in a crypt, sitting up on a throne, wearing his finest robe, with a crown on his head, his scepter in his hand and an open Bible on his lap with his finger pointing to one verse.

In 1165, King Frederick ordered that Charlemagne's tomb be opened so the former emperor's remains could be relocated in a sarcophagus beneath the floor of a cathedral. When the crypt was opened, it revealed the passage of time. The wood of the throne had rotted. Insects had devoured the robe. The crown was tarnished and had slipped askew on Charlemagne's skeleton. The scepter had fallen from his bony hand. But the Bible: The Bible remained intact, unchanged. And what verse did Charlemagne's finger still point to? Matthew 16:26: "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his soul?"

One more thought about Ecclesiastes: In the cycle of seasons of our lives, notice that the writer begins with a time to be born. And for most of the poem, he has the positive season of life followed by a negative season. In the last verse, however, hear what he changes the very last line: “a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.”

To me, this is the ultimate assurance. When God is in control of our lives, death never has the first word and war never has the last word. We may not be able to control the season we are in, but God always does. And when we hold fast to God, it makes the entire journey bearable.

On this eve of 2012, I thought it fitting that before we join in Holy Communion this morning, we engage in John Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service. Wesley invited his church members to annually reconsider their vows, not to him or the church, but to God. And so I will read the words of covenant renewal; I invite you at my instruction to join with me in the unison prayer found printed in your bulletins.