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"WHAT SHOULD WE SAY ABOUT THE YEAR 2000?"

A few Sundays ago, as I was teaching "The Year 2000: Worries & Hopes" (loosely using #2857), our congregation's moderator asked the question now titling this Thinksheet. Yes, by "we" he meant our congregation, this local church. I responded, "I'll have to do some thinking about that." This sermon is the fruit of that thinking. (Rather, I should say these sermon materials: the sermon next Sunday won't, of course, be a mere reading of this Thinksheet.)

Sisters & brothers, please think & pray along with me about what we as a people, a congregation, this church should say about the year 2000, & how we should say it--in what words & actions, through what media. The minor challenge would be for me to tell you what **I** believe I should say about the year 2000. I did some of that in a recent Thinksheet prepared for 9am adult education. But it's a major challenge, to which I must make a modest & fragmentary response, for me to try to tell you what I believe **we** should say. This sermon is only a start toward that end, & I hope we'll continue the exploration severally & together. Allow me to forego the stylistic humility of saying, further, "I think": from here on, I'll say "We should" ("I think" implied).

1 We should use the year 2000 as a springboard for **Jesus conversation**, talking about Jesus. New Year's Eve 2000 is to be Jesus' second millennial birthday bash. If we fail to talk up whose birthday party it is, the historical-spiritual dimension of the date will be lost in the secular amnesia of mere mathemeatical hoopla, an amnesia for which we will be partly responsible in that we might have done our part, individually & together, to relieve it.

How bear this witness? Not by telling others that they ought so to see the year 2000, but by simply-graciously-humbly stating that this is the way I-we, as Christian(s), look forward to the year 2000. Don't be intimidated by words like "pluralism" & "multiculturalism" & "privacy" & "freedom" (or by the abused phrase "separation of church & state")! Your neighbors do have a right to their own opinions & religion, but they have no right of protection from your noncoercively telling them *your* opinions and testifying to *your* religion. Without embarrassment, & with joy, we should sing our hymn (#295 in our hymnal), "Christ for the world we sing! The world to Christ we bring / With loving zeal...." (You won't find it in the UCC's The New Century Hymnal: it's considered imperialistic, banned along with "Onward, Christian soldiers!") The Promise Keepers, who two Saturdays ago formed the greatest crowd in the history of our capital city, are unapologetic about their Christian witness. Let us, we Christians, this church, be so also.

2 (Isn't Jesus' birthday Christmas? Not to worry! Every year, "Christmas" is the Dec.25-Jan.6 *season*, so it includes the secular "New Year's Day." We should celebrate the Incarnation every day of the season, with a big millennial hump mid-season....But doesn't the millennium begin in 2001, not 2000? Arithmetically yes, but historically no: each millennium begins not with A.D.1 [there was no such year!] but with Year 1, which is neither B.C. nor A.D.....What do I think of the current secular effort, abetted by some Christians, to **suppress** Jesus in the calendar by eliminating B.C. [Before Christ] & A.D. [In the year of our Lord]? It's of a piece with secular "multicultural" efforts to suppress Christianity. All it does is render Jesus invisible: the lingua franca calendar is still based on him [roughly parallel with the fact that the world's lingua franca is English]: B.C.E. [Before the Common Era] & C.E. [Common Era] have the further defect that no calendar is "common" to humanity.)

3 But all this calendar talk is **time**-bound. Our Christian faith, in contrast to eastern hemisphere religions, takes time seriously; but rather than being time-bound, it is both time-serious & eternity-serious--both, as in the beginning of our UCC Statement of Faith: "We believe in God, the *Eternal* Spirit, Father of...*Jesus*," who was God come among us out of **eternity** into time for the saving purpose of God within & beyond time. All that is included in what I called, at this sermon's beginning, "Jesus conversation." Does this mean that every Christian should sound like a theologian? Sort of, but even more that every theologian should sound like a Christian. Does that mean that to talk like a Christian, you must learn a lot of big words? Of course not! Rather, it means that your own words, whatever they are, should be informed by big ideas & point to What Matters Most for time & eternity. +

4 Please notice the focus of this sermon. It's about talk--what we should **say** about, & toward, the year 2000. We have only two more years to tool up our talk, improve our skills in thinking & talking like Christians & like a Christian church. Church is the easiest place to practice, especially church groups whose purpose is to learn, speak, & live the faith--Bible-study groups, prayer groups, 9am Sundays adult education. You can't engage in what I'm calling "Jesus conversation" if you aren't continuously exposing yourself to what Jesus said--so it becomes natural for you to say, inside & outside of church, "Jesus says...." (By "Jesus," I mean the canonical Christ, whom the Bible presents to us. Some latter-day scholars prefer their own "historical Jesus," whom they mock up according to their own predilections, producing a "Jesus" in their own image & disagreeing each with the others' "Jesuses." They teach that Jesus said nothing after he died: they reject as "unhistorical" the New Testament's risen speaking Lord. The news they make is only self-serving, & you need not bother yourself about their historicistic speculations.)

In learning the Christian language, I must mention, as even more basic than conversation in church & church groups, your own daily prayerful **Bible-reading** as individuals, couples, families. You aren't apt to do in church what you don't practice at home. We as Christians, as families, as a local church can be no stronger in faith & witness than we are faithful in attending to God in prayer & Bible-reading. To say it the other way around: The root of the mainline churches' weakness is the failure to promote & practice the presence of God in daily spiritual exercises (parallel with what I also hope you do practice, namely, daily physical exercises).

5 We should say about the year 2000 that God intends it to be **the best year** so far; & the Bible says it will be if we learn to live by & within God's intention, which we--as Christians, as the Church, as this church, as the world--can best see in & through the Bible, the magic telescope that let's us see everything its actual size (instead of everything big from one end of a telescope & everything small from the other). Just to illustrate, let's look at the Bible passages we've heard today from the ecumenical lectionary. For the responsive call to worship, we read together part of Ps.90 (teach us to apply ourselves to wisdom). Later I read Job 23.1-9,16-17 (God is Judge); Ps.22.1-15 (God is with us when we feel low); Amos 5.6-7,10-15 (seek the Lord & hate evil); Mark 10.17-31 (money diverts attention from riches, true riches--but can be used toward true riches [a word we each need to hear right now as we are deciding on our church pledges]); Heb.4.12-16 (God's word is alive, informing us of the One to whom each of us must render an account [as to what we did with our money, & all else within our power]).

6 We should say about the year 2000 that we'll need better **garbage management**, & we better begin now. Of course there's increasing need to better manage visible garbage, waste reduction & recycling. But as Christians & as a church we should have even greater concern about invisible garbage, the kind our society asks us to eat, junk food not for our mouths but for our minds. Of course I include most of the grist from the media mills--print, film, electronic--but also the aggressively anti-religious propaganda from America's so-called opinion-elite. Today I heard a NASA official laugh after mentioning that some imagine that God is in charge of nature-space: secular intellectuals can mention religion only in the context of mocking it. Of course there are exceptions. In the 3.30.97 NYT, a Yale prof. of computer science, said "as a nation, we have never been more confused about good and evil,...God and man. ...traditional religion has been suppressed for a generation....A society where Orgasm Studies are protected in the public schools and the Ten Commandments are forbidden isn't neutral on religion; it is actively against it....a nation starved for religion" is vulnerable to destructive cults. "In spiritually ignorant times like ours," people cobble together substitute religions that can satisfy the needs of neither self nor society, & like Heaven's Gate are sometimes suicidal. (David Gelernter) "The culture war" is not too strong a term for the fact that we--as Christians & as this church--live in a culturally heathen land in which God calls us to say "No!" to the God-haters & "Yes!" to our Lord's call to witness humbly but boldly for God & against the idols of ignorance, malice, selfishness, & the terrors little minds & shrunken spirits fall pray to....This has been more essay than sermon. But I hope it has stirred us up, as Christians & as a congregation, to more active thinking & praying about what we can & should do as the year 2000 draws swiftly near.