

PREPARING TO FACE OUR NEW YEAR

Deuteronomy 11: 11, 12 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

Today, we stand here four days into 2015--just across the threshold of this new unknown year. What is ahead for us? I read the life story of an evangelist, John G. Lake, a man God used to start what he called healing rooms. God did use him to pray for many folk back in the early 1900nds who were miraculously healed. In his healing room meetings, Pastor Lake had a little Englishman who would say to the people when they were praying, “Now let us stop praying for five minutes and believe God, and see what will happen.” I like that idea of praying and then looking to see what God has in store in His answer. Yet I know that most of us are prone to be very pragmatic about the future, and we sometimes are wise to be pragmatic, even as we believe God for His miracles. There’s an old familiar story that dates me and perhaps many of you about the Lone Ranger and Tonto. You probably know it well, but it bears repeating. The two of them were camped out in the high desert out west, in a place not unlike Rock Springs. They had pitched their tent and were laying in the open field on the ground in the middle of the night. Looking up at the bright stars decorating the late summer, midnight sky, Tonto spoke to the Lone Ranger. He said, “Kimosobe, look up at the stars and tell me what you see.” After a long contemplation, the Lone Ranger responded, “Well, Tonto, when I look at the stars and consider them through the eyes of psychology, I can see man has a long way to go, through the eyes of physiology, I see man was created a little lower than the angels, through the eyes of technology, I see that God’s thoughts are higher than man’s thoughts, through the eyes of sociology, I see the minuteness of man, through the eyes of meteorology, I see summer is ending and we are close to autumn, and through the eyes of eschatology, I see that we are living at about 11:00 o’clock at night before Jesus returns, and through the eyes of theology, I see that God is still in control.” Then the Lone Ranger looked over at Tonto and said, “When you look up at the stars, what do you see?” Tonto said, “Kimosobe, “When I look at the stars, I realize that someone stole our tent”

None of us here today, whether we are pragmatic or more theological, none of us know everything about our future as the price of gas has already dipped to \$1.99 when I got gas in Rupert, Idaho. We have many so-called prophets that are dooms-dayers, some are “preppers” preparing for the end of the world; we also have many predicting a rough winter ahead yet for us, and others telling us to prepare for another drought. We don’t know any more than Israel did at the close of the Exodus as Moses was attempting to prepare them and give them a glimpse into the Promised Land just across the Jordan River. They were facing many unknowns, many battles were ahead to be fought, there were giants to overcome, children yet

to be born, and many elderly yet to pass on into God's presence, and crops to put in, cultivate and harvest, as the daily manna from heaven was soon coming to an end. Yet what attracted me to this passage was that what Moses told the children of Israel is still good for us today, as we stand on Jordan's stormy banks and not only look forward to going home to Jesus someday, but as we look ahead to God's plans for us in 2015. I believe God's words to Moses for Israel are good for us. Paul wrote in Romans 15: 4-7, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." As we look ahead to the vast remainder of this new year of 2015, God's Word gives us a glimpse into some of the wonderful things He has in store for us. This New Year is ours for the taking—a free gift from God. Who knows what we will find up ahead to excite us or mar the New Year? What new needs are going to arise? Are there any "constants" that we can count on? I see here four "constants."

CONSTANT # 1 –WE CAN COUNT ON BOTH HILLS AND VALLEYS

AHEAD. (I.) Notice Deut. 11: 11. "But the land that you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys..." Beloved, 2015 comes to us with a fresh start offer that God walks the dark hills and He walks with us even through the valley of the shadow of death. 2015 for us all is here with hills and valleys ahead. This year we all will have to climb some steep mountains; we will need to endure to make it to the top. Recently, on the way to Boise, we went over Rattlesnake Pass in Idaho, just east of beautiful Hansel Valley. Just the sound of that small mountain pass and that valley with that interesting name reminds me of the mixed bag that 2015 will be for us all. There will be for us all some breathtaking views with majestic sunrises and sunsets. The rewards for living for Jesus in 2015 will be great. This year nevertheless will send us all at times to have to go through some valleys, to deal with pain and loss, but in our valleys, we will drink from some of God's sweetest streams. Some of these hills and valleys may be physical, some emotional, some spiritual, and some may be metaphorical hills and valleys.

On New Year's evening, there were twelve of us seated around the piano in the living room singing Christmas songs and hymns such as "Marvelous Grace" "There's A Sweet, Sweet Spirit In This Place," "Gentle Shepherd," and choruses such as Amanda and Travis Ross's son—Rolland Eugene's favorite song, "Bless The Lord, O My Soul," as this little 2 and ½ year old belted out the words. Heather was playing from memory and Andrew was on guitar. It was a mountain-top

experience, and I told our family this past Thursday to cherish this musical heritage. It made me weep as I looked back 14 years earlier to being at Mom's apartment. She was blind and Hilbert was already in the nursing home, unable to hear, and unable to walk, only sitting in a wheel chair. I sat on the piano bench for the last time with Mom as she played the piano and we sang together for our last time. I didn't know that this was our last time at that moment. Mom played flawlessly by ear and she transposed to a lower key when a song was too high. She instantly lowered it for me. Mom knew her kidneys were virtually gone. We held each other. I cried for a time and couldn't stop and she cried with me. I didn't know what that upcoming year of 2001 would present to us both. I had no idea that shortly after we left, Mom would have to go into the Bethesda Nursing Home in Beresford, South Dakota, as my oldest sister Marilyn could no longer care for her. I had no idea of the upcoming 2001 February blizzard I would drive through to Greeley to pick up my sister Ruth and finally make it going around closed roads to the north or south to finally spend the last six days of Mom's earthly life with her living and sleeping on the floor in her room at the nursing home. I didn't know we were going to pass through the final valley of the shadow of death, which for the believer is the last step up to the mountain of God in glory. Mom went Home to Jesus March 1st, 2001, exactly ten years after Jinny's Mom went Home in 1991.

Beloved, let's get it straight today. Count on life not all be coasting downhill this year. It won't all be a bed of roses and neither will it all be an impossible Mt. Everest climb. It won't all be monotonous flat land, smooth and level with boring sameness, as Job spoke in Job 6: 6 of the tastelessness of the white of an egg. None of us will die a slow death of being bored to death. There will be hills and valleys. The snow-capped peaks will store the snow for hundreds of fruitful valleys in the spring. The difficulties we encounter on the mountain treks we must go on, will drive us to our knees and to the throne of grace, before we experience God's showers of blessing on our barren hills. Beloved, it is the hills, the cold and seemingly barren hills of life that we often question and complain about, that reach up to catch the clouds and being down the rain we rejoice in, down in our green valleys. Many of us on the verge of perishing in the golden sand of the valley floor have also caught a second wind in the hills. In the hills, we have found protection from the wind. The hills at times are stern, hard and rugged, and at times too steep to climb. Yet God's hills are a gracious protection for God's people against our foes. Amazingly, though both Aaron and Moses died on mountain tops, Aaron on Mt. Hor and Moses atop the Pisgah peak on Mt. Nebo, most of us will die in the valley. Remarkably, some of us may go through that valley with a family member this year, or we ourselves may walk through this valley. It is our first constant we can count on for all of us in 2015. There's a second constant:

CONSTANT # 2—WE CAN COUNT ON SHOWERS OF BLESSING FROM HEAVEN. (II.)

The New American Standard Bible reads—“This land drinks water from the rain of heaven.” Here in the ESV, I read, “This land...drinks water by the rain from heaven.” This truth is not just for the Promised Land in 1451 BC when Moses captured these words in Hebrew. Jesus said Himself in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5: 45, “For (your Father) makes His sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” Count on it, beloved. There will be some unexpected blessings for you this year in 2015. These many blessings will come in a thousand shapes and sizes and ways and means. They may be disguised as trouble at first. I think of Psalm 91: 4 that says, “He will cover you with His pinions, feathers and under His wings you will find refuge.”

Did any of you grow up in the country where you had hens that would set and hatch a brood of baby chicks? When a hen flew out of the pen and disappeared for a while, we sometimes would never see her again until she came parading into the back yard with her doodlers as we called them. Sometimes in the stillness of a late afternoon, a shadow would come over the back yard just for a second. That mother hen didn't run to each of her chicks scattered all over the back yard. No, she acted fast. Instead she stopped eating, squatted low and spread out her wings, and began clucking. Instantly, those chicks ran like bullets from every direction. They ran under her outstretched wings. Then that mother hen pulled her wings down tightly, tucking every chick safely under her. To get to those babies, that chicken hawk had to get to them over their mother's dead body. Part of the rain from heaven is the fierceness of the motherly love of our Savior Jesus Christ, who was willing to compare His love to that of a mother hen. Jesus said to Jerusalem, in Matthew 23:37 where He said, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not, you were unwilling.” One lady I read about this week had an assailant hijacking her car. She had just finished in devotions reading Psalm 91. Without thinking, she screamed, “Feathers, feathers!” The man was stunned, stopped in his tracks, got out of the car and ran for his life. Why, it's God's rain, supplying all our needs according...

Beloved, I come to encourage you this morning. Some of us, if not all of us are at times transfixed and traumatized by that horrible isolated incident, or that awful experience, that not so righteous few months of time that we can't seem to forget. Thinking about it wakes us up and keeps us awake without sleep. It happened way back there, or perhaps recently, but the incident is clear. Why are we fixated on the past? It's because we beat ourselves up, becoming harder on ourselves than the

Lord Himself is. God actually views us more accurately than we do. God isn't caught up in our dismal failure, He isn't caught up in the incident that makes us so ashamed. God doesn't live in the world of what might have been or what wasn't His will. He still heals the broken hearted and binds up our wounds. (Psalm 147: 3) God loves us and He longs to bless us. It's like this past Monday afternoon, in a big snowstorm at the top of Bogus Basin 12 miles north of Boise. What a beautiful trip up there on hair-pin curves for 12 miles on snow-packed roads. That ski resort area is beautiful. I went with Jinny to pay for the privilege of skiing. I walked into the Nordic Center at Frontier Point Lodge, and the lady told me, "It's pretty close to Christmas. It's on us today!" She didn't know me, but as I skied with Jinny on the Nordic Highway 2 km out to the Bitterroot Chair Lift and 2 back, it made me smile to know—we were skiing free on God's rain from heaven. By the way, church, sometimes this year, we may have felt like we were stuck at the Bitterroot Chair Lift, with the finances under budget, but it has rained from heaven on us and we've finished the month of December \$3,307.40 in the black—not because we are a perfect church, no, we aren't, but God loves us and He has sent us His saturating moisture from the rain of heaven. PTL! And He will do it again in 2015. Thirdly,

CONSTANT # 3—WE CAN COUNT ON GOD SEEKING THE BEST FOR EACH ONE OF US. (III.) I read in Deut. 11: 12, "A land that the Lord your God cares for." The New Century Version says, "It is a land the Lord your God loves." The problem in this verse is knowing what to do with the Hebrew word **darash**. Darash means to tread or to frequently go to, to follow, to pursue, to seek or search for, to care for, or to ask about diligently with many questions. Sometimes it is next to impossible to put into English words what one little Hebrew word means. The idea is to personally care for, to search out the best place for us to be, the best circumstances for us to face, and to look out for all the best for us. Part of the meaning is found in Psalm 23 where David speaks of the Lord being his Shepherd and making us lie down in lush green pastures, leading us beside still waters, and preparing a table set for us in the presence of our enemies. It is also the idea of Jesus' words in John 14: 1-3 where He promises us that He is going to prepare a place for us in heaven, that where He is, there we may be also. What is it God is going to do in 2015. He knows best how to job hunt for us. He wants us to stay open to His perfect will. Are you troubled in your marriage? Count on it—God is out to repair your marriage and bring to it His counsel, and His desired restoration. But we only get the best when we leave the choice with Him. Are you asking God for a wife or a husband? Count on it. God's will is that He is the Divine Match-Maker. He has the preferred right future picked out for you and me. He's gone ahead and planned the right future for us. He knows what college is for us, if we are to go into the military, into nursing, into technical training or into missionary

service. God is our scout, way-maker, forerunner, personal confidential trainer, manager and advisor. Don't count on this constant if you desire to improve on God's will. There is a fine line between being negligent and being a controller or a fixer who knows better than God. But as we face 2015, we must trust and entrust our lives and the lives of those we love to God's sovereign will and providence. If the weight of doing something God asks us to do is too heavy, count on it, either (1) it is not God's will, opposed to His word, or (2) God is letting us feel the heavy weight of stepping out of His will, or (3) we are not trusting or entrusting our lives and those we love to the One who is seeking out the best for us and them as we obey Him. Count on it, God will seek out the best for you in 2015. 4thly, lastly,

CONSTANT # 4—WE CAN COUNT ON OUR FATHER'S EYES

WATCHING US AT EVERY MOMENT. (IV.) Notice verse 12 continues, "The eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year." You may say, "His eyes are just on the land." Well, if God can see the tiny land of Israel that fits inside Sweetwater County, are His eyes unable to see you? Oh, He sees, and He is on the lookout for each of us. II Chronicles 16: 9 is clear, "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward Him." The knowledge of our Father's eyes can be incredibly comforting to the believer or for the backslidden believer or unbeliever, His watchful eyes are a devastating realization. But count on His eyes in 2015. He won't miss a single thing we think, say, or do. Married couples, God sees and hears every accusation, every argument, every act or decision of disobedience or disrespect, college students and teens, and children, He sees every act of dishonesty or dishonor or disobedience. Are you being overlooked for a promotion? God sees. Is the coach making you sit on the bench, ignoring your talent and ability, because of political pressure? God sees. Does God know about the false accusations against you or me? When others are blind to the truth, He sees and knows—how long?—Deut. 11: 12—"from the beginning of the year to the end of the year." Beloved, accept the uncertainty of life, but remember the constants—all four. It puts a premium on the present because we don't assume anything about the future. It gives an urgency to the present. It means we don't leave undone what we can do. Two little girls had been watching one of their grandmas. One of them asked, "What do you think makes grandma read so much of her Bible? The other girl said, "I think she's cramming for finals." Beloved, in 2015, whatever time each of us have left, use it for God's glory. Before us are the four constants, both hills and valleys, rain from heaven, God's seeking the best for us all, and our Father's eyes at every moment. These 4 constants will last all year through from the beginning to the end. Amen.