

## Hindsight 2020 #2

2020 was such an Interesting year. In fact, I heard it went viral. I know that we're all happy that 2020 is over, but don't celebrate the fact that it's 2021 too much. Don't you realize that next year is the sequel 2020 too.

We're spending a couple of weeks looking back over the last year and considering the lessons learned from a year that has impacted all of our lives. It's a little series we're calling Hindsight 2020. Last week we looked at several of the lessons learned from the pandemic. This week I wanted to expand our vision a little wider, because there were a few other things that happened in 2020 besides Covid 19.

Did you hear about the two hardcore Trump supporters who died and went to heaven?

God meets them at the pearly gates and asks if they have any questions. One of them says, Yes, what were the real results of the 2020 election and who was behind the fraud?

God says, "My son, there was no fraud. Biden won the Electoral College fair and square.

After a few seconds of stunned silence, the one guy turns to the other and whispers, "This goes higher up than we thought."

That's the kind of year it's been. A highly contentious election, a polarized population, and protests and riots on a scale not seen since the 1960s. Lifelong friends unfollowed and unfriended online. Family members who wouldn't talk to each other, and yes, even people who quit coming to church because of the politics of someone else at church.

I must confess this is a sermon I'm scared to preach because these are still very fresh wounds for some of us. We have very strong feelings about these things. It's amazing how a few words can get us riled up. You want to start an argument just be a part of a group of people and say "Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, or All lives matter." Then stand back and watch the fireworks. You want to ignite a firestorm on social media, just post a meme of some antifa or QAnon types with an inflammatory quote and the fuse is lit.

Why would any preacher with good sense want to go picking at these wounds? The risk is no matter what I say, I'm going to offend someone. When you're hurt, you don't like the doctor to go poking in the places where it hurts, but that's exactly what you need. That's why I preach. This is exactly the right time to consider the lessons we should learn from a year like 2020.

Paul tells the young preacher, Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2, "*Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction.*" It's what God calls me to do, so let's seek God's help this morning.

Prayer: Give us eyes to see and ears to hear. Amen

There are some political, worldview lessons that I learned last year such as politics and science

don't mix. Politicians love to use crises to spend money on things that have nothing to do with the crisis, and politicians stay in power by creating division instead of casting vision.

But we're looking for life lessons –faith lessons. It's not that politics don't matter, but I think Jesus would say something along the lines of render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's. Why are you spending so much energy fiddling around with something that lasts only four years, when eternity is on the line? So, again, in no particular order here are some other lessons learned from 2020.

### **Listen to A Variety of Opinions**

Lesson number one– listen to a variety of opinions. As our country gets more and more polarized, it can feel a bit less intimidating hunker down with our own ideas. It's certainly more comfortable to spend time with those who agree with us. They affirm our opinions, reassure our thought process and make us feel validated. I must be right all my friends agree with me.

We all need some of these, and I hate to even use the term because of what it's become– safe spaces in our lives. Someplace you can go, a group with whom you can freely speak your mind, and they can pat you on the back and say, "I feel you, man. I know what you're thinking." That can be healthy to a degree.

But it can also go too far. If no one and nothing ever challenges our ideas, if we never give due consideration to a differing viewpoint, if every contrary thought is automatically discarded, we run the risk of not just becoming hard headed, but hard hearted. We all have certain thoughts and feelings and if we are constantly surrounded by things that only affirm those thoughts and feelings, they become amplified.

This is what so much of social media and the online virtual world does to us. We surround ourselves with voices that reinforce our own ideas to the exclusion of all others. We unfollow those who don't agree. We listen only to voices that tell me I'm right and the other side is wrong. We read rants that fire us up, articles that always spin things in a certain direction, and read posts that cherry pick their evidence. It's so easy to live in an echo chamber that pushes us further and further along a chosen path. There's nothing to check it. Nothing to stop it. So, often the difference between fake news and real news is whether or not we agree with it.

And it happens on both sides. I have friends on the right who only read right wing sites, and friends on the left who only read left wing sites, unless they're looking for ammunition. I've been astounded at the amount of untruth that gets fed to each side, and they get pushed further and further to the extremes. Before you know it, we can only yell at each other and not talk with each other.

We get to the point where we don't just want to debate the other side, we want to delete the other side. We don't just disagree with them, we feel like we must dehumanize them.

So, what does God's word say about all of this? Two scriptures come to mind. The first is James 1:19-20:

*19 Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.*

In 2020 there was a lot of anger in our country. Everyone was mad at someone. Where did all this anger come from? Part of the problem is we live in a culture where everyone is talking but no one is listening.

God has given us two ears, but only one mouth. That should be a clue. We should only speak as half as much as we listen. But it's so hard. I want to speak twice as much as I listen.

The consequence of all this talking and not listening is that it leads to anger. Isn't that what we've seen played out on the streets of American cities? Isn't that what so many of the bits and bytes sent through Facebook and Twitter have been? Anger. And the spiritual danger verse 20 warns is that, "*human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.*"

Instead, listen to the wisdom of Proverbs. Proverbs 15:22 *Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.* If you want to succeed listen to a variety of opinion.

Proverbs 24:6 *Surely you need guidance to wage war, and victory is won through many advisers.* Victory is not found in always getting what you want, instead triumph lies down the path of listening to a variety of opinions.

And yes, it even applies to national politics. Proverbs 11:14 *For lack of guidance a nation falls, but victory is won through many advisers.*

This does not mean we shouldn't have core convictions or bedrock beliefs. There is such a thing as absolute truth. There are some hills worth fighting and dying on.

But there is much wisdom to be gained by listening to a variety of opinions. You might learn something new. You might gain understanding of someone with whom you disagree. Who knows, you might even be able to talk and let the light of Jesus shine through.

### **Many Believers Have Priorities Above Jesus.**

Unfortunately, a second lesson this last year showed us is that many believers have priorities in their lives that matter more than Jesus. This one is not in your insert, because I accidentally skipped this point in my notes. It became very obvious to me last year that a lot of believers, when push came to shove, have things in their lives that matter more than their faith.

I don't want to go pointing fingers at some things while overlooking others, because this was a widespread phenomenon. For some it was politics— this cause or that cause. This group or that group. Is who a brother or sister in Christ votes for the most important thing about them? For some, it was health and safety. I found it funny how many people believe that church is the only

place you can catch Covid. Wal-Mart's okay. Grillos is fine. But church, oh, no, can't go there. We're trying to stay safe. For some it is money. For some it was comfort and convenience.

When God says, "*You shall have no other Gods before me,*" he's not just talking about idols and graven images. Anything you prioritize in your life above Jesus is an idol. 2020 exposed some of those idols in our lives. Some of us have some real soul searching to do.

I know for me, this was a question I really had to wrestle with a few times this past year. Is Jesus really the most important thing in my life? Does he really matter most? What do I truly believe and what does that mean for how I live.

What did 2020 reveal to you about your own heart? Maybe there some rearranging that needs to take place.

### **Balance is Hard to Find**

Number three— balance is hard to find. I like to think of myself as a fairly balanced person— not given to extremes. My wife might point out I'm not nearly as balanced as I think.

Balance is important in the spiritual life. We are to keep on the straight and narrow path. Proverbs 4:25-27 counsels,

*25Let your eyes look straight ahead;  
fix your gaze directly before you.*

*26Give careful thought to the c paths for your feet  
and be steadfast in all your ways.*

*27Do not turn to the right or the left; (Speaking of spiritual balance, not politics)  
keep your foot from evil.*

One of my favorite and most influential professors in Bible college, J.K. Jones, loved to talk about the importance of balance. He loved the word tension. Our lives are always caught in the tension of two extremes. The world and our sinful nature always wants us to pull us in one direction or the other. Pride and arrogance this way or doubt and depression the other way. Quarrelsome and contentious on the one hand, or timid and fearful on the other. So much of spiritual growth is learning to walk the tightrope between extremes.

But in 2020 balance was so hard to find. This was true on a community or even a national level. What is the proper balance between public safety and individual freedom; individual rights verses community responsibility?

It was also true on a very personal level. How do I find the balance between my concerns for my physical health versus my emotional or mental health? Those were tough choices. Do I support a candidate that I find personally and morally reprehensible to support causes that I find laudable? I decided one way, but there are those that I love and whose faith I deeply admire who decided differently. Balance is hard to find.

Amidst this tension it was so easy to forget that God is our peace. In Rom. 16:20 Paul calls God *the God of peace who will soon crush Satan under his feet*. Ironic that a God of peace is pictured crushing enemies beneath his feet. But God brings peace by destroying the enemy that steals it away. It's also ironic that in a year that we needed God's presence more than ever, so many of us put ourselves in a position to experience it less. I wonder if that's exactly what Satan wanted.

Remember the promise of Philippians 4:7, "*And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*" Balance is hard to find, but peace is found in Jesus.

### **2020 Exposed Deeper Seated Issues**

Lesson four– 2020 exposed deeper seated issues. Some of the biggest problems of 2020 weren't caused by 2020, they were just exposed by 2020. The problem was already there, we were just able to hide it better.

Sometimes the bigger issue isn't the crisis itself, but the deeper problems exposed by the crisis. For example, race relations and racial reconciliation was not nearly as far along as we'd hoped. We can have different opinions on Black Lives Matter as an organization and if systemic racism is a deeply rooted problem in our country. What we cannot argue, though, is that many people in our country believe that it is. That makes it a real issue.

Debating the facts only gets us so far, and to a large extent perception is reality. It is obvious that steps need to be made toward racial healing in our country. And as the people of God, a God who created every man and woman in his image, a people made up of every tribe and language and people and nation, racial healing must begin with us. We must take the first step.

That doesn't mean giving into every outrageous demand made by every extremist race hustler. However, their abuse of a cause does not excuse us from our responsibility to live out his cause of reconciliation. What are we willing to do to live out the reality that Jesus died for all people, bled for the forgiveness of all people, and loves all people and wants them to come to a saving knowledge of the truth?

We must love our neighbor, and it doesn't matter what their race is. It doesn't matter where they live. It doesn't matter what their politics are. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan means nothing if it doesn't mean those things.

### **Use the Off Switch**

Number Five – Use the off switch. Early on in the pandemic we were very dependent on technology. Many of us had never heard of Zoom before 2020. Then it was Zoom church. Zoom work. Zoom classes. We binged shows on Netflix. We connected with friends and family through social media. When the internet went out during the pandemic, it was a national crisis. Call in the National guard, there's no Wi-Fi, and there will soon be blood in the streets.

And yet as the year drug on the technology lost it's luster. Online church was fun for about two weeks. In fact, many churches reported record numbers in March or early April. By the end of May and June the bottom fell out.

How many students are sick of online classes? And the constant barrage of news, updates, posts and notifications was just overwhelming. People spouting off their opinions on the election, constant protests and riots, opinions on masks and shut downs. Articles talked about how families and lifelong friends had been torn apart over issues that just a year before weren't even on anyone's radar. Every time you turned around someone either said something offensive or found something offensive. The outrage and denunciations flowed thick and heavy. 280 characters on Twitter have a far reaching effect.

You know what the solution to so much of this is. Turn it off. Log off, shut down, tune out, and turn it off. Last week I talked about how Jesus often withdrew to lonely places to be alone with God. I think a part of applying that to our digital world, is sometimes we have to turn it off.

A lonely place can be the quiet place where we don't have Pandora playing, Netflix streaming, phone buzzing, and emails and messages constantly demanding our attention. Put your phone in silent mode during dinner. Let a message go unanswered for a bit. You do realize that 99% of it is not an emergency. It is not urgent, and the world will keep on spinning if you get to it later.

It's also a good idea to take a break from social media. I've heard from a number of people who simply got off Facebook this year, and do you know what they discovered? Their lives were so much happier and peaceful. They got their time back, their sanity back, and the freedom to simply think whatever they wanted to think.

There came a point in 2020 where it was simply too much. With so much work and school online, it was nice just to go outside, to work on a project with my hands, do a puzzle, read a book, listen to some classic vinyl, just to turn it off.

Oh, and one more thing. Turn off the news sometimes. Don't watch it. Don't read the headlines. Don't scan the trending stories. I guarantee you will be happier. Now, I'm a voracious consumer of news and current events, but do you know I make it a habit to completely ignore the news on Saturdays. I've found that I'm much more effective as a preacher if I'm not worked up about whatever the latest hot-button issue is. But I learned something more in 2020. After checking the news sites multiple times a day early in the Pandemic, I finally hit a point where I went a whole week and didn't check them at all. My mental health, my attitude, my relationship with God all improved. Use the off switch.

### **Trust in God.**

Two more lessons real quick. Number Six – trust in God. Was there anything that you worried about in 2020? The election? Losing your job? Getting sick. Loved one getting Covid. Cancelled

plans? Family traditions celebrated for years that had to be shelved? Going to the bathroom without toilet paper?

God's got this. Remember what I said last week— God wasn't surprised by anything in 2020. He saw it all coming. We love to quote Romans 8:28, "*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*"

But do you know who we learn that, how we prove its truthfulness, how we experience it in real life? By going through times that aren't so good.

Just as 2020 exposed for a lot of believers that Jesus really wasn't the most important thing in their lives, for other believers, 2020 served to deepen our trust in Him. Our faith is stronger. Our relationship closer. Our devotion deeper.

A recent survey done by the University of Chicago Divinity School and the Associate Press explored how our faith played a role in the pandemic and how the pandemic affected our faith.

According to the survey, 26% said their faith has become stronger because of the outbreak, while only 1% say the pandemic has weakened their faith. The study found that 61 percent of people with a religious affiliation were community beneficial behaviors, like looking after neighbors. Compare that to only 39 percent of those without faith.

### **Remember What Unites Us**

Lesson 7, and this is my last point. Remember what unites us. I spent many Wednesday mornings in 2020 on my Wednesday morning pastor's Zoom call listening to heartbroken preachers tell how 2020 was tearing their churches apart. People left churches because some people in the church belonged to a different political party. Do you realize that Jesus had among his disciples a tax collector and a zealot. That's like having an Antifa guy and a Proud Boy serve on the church board together. Another minister said several of their biggest givers left and went to a church that "wears cowboy hats and burns masks on the altar." And this was a church that had several people die from Covid.

In 2020, there were a lot of things to divide us. Disagreements about masks and public health policy, elections, race riots, protests, counter protests, but as brothers and sisters in Christ, we must remember what unites us. Let me leave you with the words of Paul in Ephesians 4:2-6

*Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

If you will forgive my completely intentional pun, that which unites us trumps anything that would divide us.