

# Hope for 2023

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Rev. Jeff Mansfield

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Preaching on:

Revelation 21:1–6a

I was technically on vacation this past week, so I haven't prepared anything to say, but that doesn't mean I don't have a few things on my heart that I would like to share with you on New Year's Day. And I especially want to just start by saying thank you to Tom so much for putting together this service and giving me a little break. This is a wonderful way to ring in the new year. Thank you, Tom. The new year has always been about ringing in joy and celebration, right? It is an opportunity to look forward to things that are coming, to celebrate things that have passed, to get together, to drink and eat and be merry, and just to dream about the possibilities. And yet more and more in the last few years, I have been sensing this growing feeling of pessimism in our culture that I feel like has even invaded the way we think culturally about what the new year is.

The new year has become more about saying, oh, thank God that last year is over, and fingers crossed that this next year won't be worse. But who knows what it might have in store for us, right? I think this pessimism has been reflected in some polling that's been done about how Americans and people around the world are feeling about the future of our country. This is on both sides of the political aisle. People are feeling pessimistic about what's in store for us for the future, economically, politically and all kinds of other ways. And, and it's true around the globe. We're at a time where people are feeling this pessimism, and I think it's reflected even more in our young people than anybody else. And that's really concerning because the youngest generation, the kids coming up, they're supposed to be the ones who are bright-eyed and bushy-tailed who believe that they can tackle the problems of the world and make a true difference.

And yet they are feeling like they might not want to jump in with both feet. For instance, in polling 25% of people under 35 years of age—25%—say that they have changed their plans for having children. They're either not having children at all, or they're reducing the number of children that they're having because of concerns about climate change, right? And this real sense that there is a disaster looming for our country and the whole world so that they don't know that they want to commit to the project of humanity continuing to move forward. They want to step out because they're so afraid of what that unknown is going to be like and how bad it might be for people. 25%, that's really significant.

85% of GenZs who have been polled feel that climate change is the biggest issue for the world. And 85% feel like if we don't do more right now to address climate change, that large swaths of the planet could be rendered uninhabitable in their lifetimes, right? That's huge to carry that burden as a young person, as a teenager looking to try and figure out what you're going to do in the world and in life. Now, the good news is that there are a number of people who feel like it's a big issue, climate change, and many of the other issues we face, but who are feeling optimistic about it. But in polling even more, people are feeling pessimistic about it. Now, I am saying this, I'm not a futurist. I'm not a political commentator. I'm not an oracle. I do not know what the future is going to bring. And I certainly don't mean to suggest that the political and environmental and economic problems that we are facing as a nation and as a world are not significant and that they shouldn't be things that we're not worried about.

I do not mean to belittle anybody's perception of how bad things are, but as a pastor, I have to be concerned with the soul of the nation, and the people, and the *esprit de corps*. No matter how big the tragedy, no matter how big the unknown, the Christian response and the response that we should be trying to elicit from the world, though the energy we should be putting into the world is that no problem is too big for us to align to it hopefully, positively, and actively. That is what we have to do. And that's a contribution that we can bring to the world as Christians, we bring it with our Christian faith. We also just bring it with our faith perspective. That perspective is this: that Christians are not defined by the size of the problem or the magnitude of the tragedy. We are defined by God's ability to respond to the problem and to the tragedy. It is not for us to be pessimistic, to say, woe is me. It is for us to step up to

a problem and say, yeah, that's a big problem. God is bigger. Our faith is bigger, our hope is bigger. We can do this together. Now, it's not pie in the sky, and the stereotype of Christians is of course, that we're just gonna try and pray it away, right. And that, oh, if you just believe in God, then you don't have to believe in problems, and that's not it. As Christians, we need to acknowledge the depth of the pain that our young people are feeling about their future. And if we do not do that, then they will never believe that this faith or this church or this spiritual alignment that we have has anything to say to them because they will believe, I think maybe rightfully, that we have our heads buried in the sand.

We need to acknowledge their pain, the magnitude and the depths of the problems that we face, and then we need to step up next to them and say, I believe that we, and that you can do this. I believe that God is with us. And no matter what may come in the year or the decade or the century ahead, our alignment to the future must be one of hope and action.

And even if there was a way to look into the future and to see, oh, no, everything is tragedy and awful in the future—as so much of our culture is obsessed with doing in movies right now, these apocalyptic fantasies about just how bad it's going to be. Let's say that every one of them is totally true and correct. That doesn't change how we feel about the future in this room as Christians. As Christians, we still approach that future with the same hope and determination that we approach some Utopia, maybe even more so because we are going to be God's response.

Tragedy is always going to be with us. It always has been with us. Pessimism is always going to be with us. It always has been with us. I would encourage you, if you don't have any resolutions yet to make this your resolution, that you are going to align yourself to the problems of the future with hope and determination, and that you will tell the young people in your lives that you understand why they are afraid and that you will stand by them and act with them to make a difference.