



**Date:** January 3, 2021  
**Speaker:** Trish Haq – Pastor of Care  
**Scripture:** Luke 2: 25-34  
**Standalone:** 2020 Was A Cliffhanger...

Well hello North Park Church, my name is Trish Haq, I'm the pastor of Care Ministry here.

Welcome to 2021! Looking back on the year that we have just lived through, there is definitely a lot to reflect on at the start of the new year. But if you could sum up the year 2020 in just one word, what would it be?

One internet search that I did came up with the word "Dumpster Fire" to describe 2020. And in some ways, that feels just about right.

Christmas was certainly not usual this year, but I wonder if any of you tuned into one of those fireplace channels that are often available over the holidays. There's usually a lovely fireplace with a crackling fire and some Christmas music in the background. Well this past Christmas, someone actually made a dumpster fire version especially for 2020. The dumpster is surrounded by garbage bags, and there is a person tending to the fire, dressed in jeans and a red flannel shirt. He hangs some stockings on the front of the dumpster, and is seen throwing various 2020 items into the fire including toilet paper, Lysol wipes, a puzzle, and a suitcase. At one point he adds a few pumps of hand sanitizer to the blaze, and even throws in some freshly baked bread along with a jar of sourdough starter. When I came across this video, it gave me a good laugh for sure, and it definitely resonated. It has been a tough year.

But maybe there is a better word than dumpster fire to sum up the year we've just been through.

Finding a word of the year is actually something that many dictionaries officially try to do at the end of each year. In 2019, the Oxford English Dictionary chose "climate emergency" as the defining words of the year. And back in 2015 they actually chose an emoji as their word of the year, reflecting the way that communication is changing. The emoji they chose was "face with tears of joy", an emoji that definitely does not sum up the year we've just been through.

For 2020, both Merriam Webster and Dictionary.com chose the word "pandemic". Probably not a huge surprise. But what I found interesting, was that creators of the Oxford English Dictionary decided that they couldn't narrow it down to just one word. There were too many defining words for 2020, and any one of them could have held the spotlight all on their own. In light of this, they chose a collection of words that they've called *Words of an unprecedented year*. These words include:

*Coronavirus, Lockdown, Social Distancing, and of course, pandemic, but also Systemic Racism, Black Lives Matter, Cancel Culture, Bushfire, Mail-in, unmute, and possibly my favourite, Blursday* – which is when you've been sheltering in place for so long that you've lost all sense of what day it is. Across the globe, new language took hold this year, to try to put words to what we experienced, and the words I've highlighted are just a few of the many words chosen. I love this quote from their 2020 words of the year report. They said:

"It's both unprecedented and a little ironic—in a year that left us speechless, 2020 has been filled with new words unlike any other."

On many levels, 2020 will go down in history as a notoriously terrible year. It was a year that began with an entire continent on fire. A year that brought all the pain and injustice of systemic racism to the forefront. And of course, a year that unleashed a pandemic that profoundly impacted our lives on pretty much every level.

So what words have defined this year for you?

Maybe isolation. Or loneliness, Disappointment. Fear & anxiety. Disbelief. Shock. Sickness. Stress. Sadness. Grief. Loss.

As we stand on the threshold of a new year, we are more than ready to put this dumpster fire of a year behind us and move forward into a year that we hope will see the beginnings of the end of this pandemic. But I think we're also all too aware that there is a lot about 2020 that we can't just leave behind.

What we've been through this year has changed the landscape of our lives in so many ways. And we've been shaped by what we have been through this year. It has impacted our physical and mental health, our relationships, our finances and economy, and even our faith. We are fundamentally changed by our experiences, and what we have experienced this year has been challenging and traumatic, personally, and on a global scale. There's a lot that we need to process, and as we are all too aware, the reality is that we are not through it yet. 2020 is finished but the pandemic isn't. And we know, the impact that this year has had will continue to reverberate in 2021, and there are still many unknowns ahead of us.

So, as much as we are feeling eager to say goodbye to 2020, and celebrate that we made it through this challenging year, there are many things that we just don't get to say goodbye to yet. BUT, there are also things that happened to us in 2020 that we shouldn't try to leave behind—things that we need to remember, and carry forward with us into the year ahead. 2020 wasn't just a giant dumpster fire, for many it was also a character-building, faith-deepening kind of year.

With this in mind, I decided to interview a few North Parkers to get their perspective; to hear what it is that God's been teaching them this past year, that they'd like to carry forward into 2021. Take a look:

*Interviews with Bill LaBranche, Kayleigh Talsma, and Wesley & Wilma Prescod*

As I'm hoping these interviews have shown, there are a different set of defining words that also belong to 2020. While none of these words seemed to make

it onto the word of the year lists, I know they were equally defining for 2020. Words like Resilience. Compassion. Generosity, Gratitude, and Kindness—we saw these words unfold as neighbours, friends and family checked in on each other, made porch deliveries, and cared for one another on a whole new level this year.

Another word that comes to mind is connection. This year there were back yard visits, driveway chats with neighbours. People met for walks. And enjoyed FaceTime calls with loved ones. And this year, we picked up our smart phones and used them to make actual phone calls. We found ways to stay connected. And I think we came to realize just how important we are to one another.

I also think of words like simplicity, and slowing down. Being still. Leaning into prayer. And relying on God. For many, those early days of lockdown put a halt to the busy chaos of life, and invited us into a deeper trust and reliance on God.

2020 was a unique and challenging year, with unprecedented difficulties; but it also had unprecedented depth. And I think we have yet to see the full scope of all the ways that this year has strengthened us, grown us, and challenged us to be better.

And so, this moment of saying goodbye to 2020 and hello to 2021 is an important time to reflect on what we've been through this past year ... and it's important for us to ask this question: as much as we want to put 2020 behind us, what has God has been teaching us that we need to carry forward with us into the year ahead?

As you ponder that question, I want to turn to a story found in the Bible that I reflected on this past December. It's a story that I think can help us as we step forward into the year ahead of us.

Throughout December, we've been going through a sermon series called the *Songs of Christmas*. It's a series that has looked at the songs found throughout the Christmas story. Whether it was Mary's magnificat, Zechariah's prophecy, Simeon's unusual blessing, or the Angel's Gloria in excelsis deo, each song was a joyful response, praising God for something amazing that he had done.

But the Christmas story is not the only place in the Bible where we find people joyfully responding to God with songs of praise. When God liberated the Israelites from slavery out of Egypt, after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, God's people burst into song. I won't read the whole thing as it is long, but here are a few verses of the song of deliverance that the Israelites sang after they crossed the Red Sea, found in the book of Exodus:

### **Exodus 15:11-13**

#### **A Song of Deliverance**

<sup>11</sup> "Who is like you among the gods,  
O LORD—  
glorious in holiness,  
awesome in splendor,  
performing great wonders?  
<sup>12</sup> You raised your right hand,  
and the earth swallowed our enemies.  
<sup>13</sup> "With your unfailing love you lead  
the people you have redeemed.  
In your might, you guide them  
to your sacred home.

The way that God rescued the Israelites from oppression was a truly miraculous moment. God led them out of Egypt with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, guiding and protecting them. He split the sea so they could cross safely, then closed the great walls of water onto their oppressors, securing their freedom. It is not surprising that this song of deliverance burst forth from the people. A song telling of the incredible way that God had rescued them from their enemies, and declaring and celebrating God's greatness, power, and unfailing love.

But just a few chapters later, the people's song of praise was nowhere to be heard. Great uncertainty stretched ahead of them. They were worried and scared, and so doubt crept in. Discontent took root. And the grumbling and complaining began.

In their eagerness to put Egypt behind them and move forward towards the promised land, it seems they also left behind their awe and wonder and gratitude for all that God had done for them.

During this time in the wilderness, the Israelites made a lot of mistakes that I think we can learn from as we face the season of uncertainty, fear, and

challenge that lies ahead of us. Today, we're just going to look at two of those mistakes:

#### **The first mistake the Israelites made is that they grumbled and complained when God did not meet their expectations.**

The Israelites had experienced a deep sense of joy and hope when they sang that song of deliverance on the shores of the Red Sea. They had witnessed firsthand the power of God at work, and His great love for them. After such a miraculous liberation from Egypt, the Israelites did not expect to wander in the wilderness for 40 years. They did not expect that the next chapter of the story would include challenges, and suffering, and hardship. But the story God was writing had more depth and purpose than just their comfort and happiness. There was work to be done—because God wanted to shape them into a nation that would reflect the grace and glory of God to the entire world.

This grumbling and complaining revealed that the people's hearts were not right. They had a posture of discontent and distrust of God because things were not unfolding the way they wanted or expected.

Can you relate to any of this? Have you ever found yourself grumbling and complaining about the state of things this past year? Has it been difficult to trust God in the face of all that our world has been going through?

INTERVIEWS: Wesley & Wilma; Bill Labranche, Kayleigh Talsma

When I think back to the start of 2020, I know that none of us expected to experience a global pandemic. Of course, it's perfectly reasonable that we didn't. None of us could have anticipated what was about to happen in our world. Even so, many of us likely began 2020 with expectations about the kind of year we thought God would provide for us, and those expectations might have made it challenging to continue to put our trust and our hope in God when things got tough.

This reveals that sometimes, when we *say* that we are putting our trust in God, what we actually mean is this:

God, I trust you *as long as* nothing bad happens to me or my loved ones.

God, I trust you *as long as* you protect me from pain and suffering.

God, I trust you *as long as* when I follow you and do everything right, you bless me with the things that I am hoping and dreaming for.

Now don't get me wrong, God does pour out His blessing on us, but we have to adjust our understanding of what it looks like to be blessed by God, and in doing so, we must drop these 'as long as' clauses as we seek to trust Him. Just think about the Beatitudes for a moment—Jesus' most famous teaching on what God's blessing looks like.

According to Jesus, you are blessed when you are poor, hungry, weeping, mourning, despised, rejected, and persecuted. In all these circumstances, Jesus tells us to "rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven."

We *can* rejoice, and we *can* have great hope, because in the Kingdom of God, those who weep will one day laugh, those who mourn will be comforted, those who hunger will be satisfied. In this life, we do get to taste of God's goodness and comfort and mercy in difficult times, but we must also remember that it is in heaven that we will experience the fullness of his grace and love.

Jesus' teaching about God's blessing is challenging, but it also means that we can experience God's blessing whether we are in the desert or the promised land. God's blessing is less about our circumstances, and much more about experiencing a taste of His comfort and peace and joy in the midst of our circumstances, and anticipating the fullness of his grace and love that we will one day experience in heaven.

God hasn't promised us a life free of pain and struggle, but He has promised to be present with us in the midst of all that we go through. And sometimes life's most painful and difficult circumstances create sacred space in our lives where we are able to perceive and experience God's grace and blessing in a deeper way.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are those who weep, for they will laugh

Blessed are those who hunger, for they will be satisfied.

Whatever hardships we face in our lives, God has promised that the day will come when He will make all things new—when there will be no more death or crying or pain. And so, when we seek to put our trust in God, we need to redefine what that means.

To get to a point where we can say:

God, I trust you *even if* bad things happen

God, I trust you *even if* I experience pain and suffering

God, I trust you *even if* my life doesn't unfold in the way that I was hoping and dreaming of.

I know that this kind of trust is not easy. And for some of you, this year has challenged your capacity to trust God. If that's true for you, I hope you know that you aren't alone in that. Trusting God is not always easy.

It certainly wasn't easy for the Israelites. Despite the miraculous things God had done for them, when challenges arose, they were quick to lose hope.

And this leads us to the second mistake I want to look at today: **the people's constant forgetting of all that God had done for them, and all that He had taught them.**

I wonder what their time in the desert might have been like if they had held on more tightly to that song of praise that had welled up in them on the shores of the Red Sea. Because when we remember and celebrate the good things that God has done for us, it helps us to trust Him when things get difficult.

And maybe you haven't had a dramatic Red Sea God moment in your life—but I'll bet most, if not all of you, have had moments in your life where you experienced God's grace, His loving presence, His forgiveness, or His provision just when you needed it. When you think back on your own life, and your relationship with God, are there moments, big or small, where you experienced God's active presence in your life? Moments where a song of praise rose up in you because of what God had done for you?

Remember these moments often. Remind yourself of the goodness of God that you have experienced in your life. It will help you to trust God in the midst of a difficult season. And when you can't remember a moment of your own, you can lean into

the stories of others to help remind you of who God is, and to find hope when things get dark and difficult. I know I am always greatly encouraged when I hear someone share how God has worked in their life, or when I read about the miraculous encounters with God that have been recorded in the pages of the Bible. These stories can encourage us. They give us hope. They remind us that God is actively present in our lives, and that He is unfolding an incredible story of redemption in our world.

Thinking about all this brought to mind a dear North Park woman who passed away this year. Her name was Judy. Judy used to come for our Saturday night service. She would arrive early because she relied on paratransit to get here, but she didn't mind. She loved sitting and listening to the worship team practice. She was an enthusiastic and whole hearted worshipper. She loved church, and she loved God. But Judy did not have it easy. Her life was marked by many difficulties, painful experiences, profound losses, and a significant disability that placed huge limits on her life. She was a real firecracker, and she used to tell me often—I trust God, and I know He's good, and I know that He knows what He's doing, but sometimes I'm not sure what he's doing. Someday, when I get to heaven, He and I are going to have a conversation. I've got some questions for him.

There were things about her life, the struggles she had faced, that she didn't understand. She had experienced more than her fair share of difficulties. But she trusted God enough to believe that despite all that she had been through, He was still good, and sovereign, and worthy of her praise and worship. And she knew that one day she would meet God face to face and she TRUSTED that when that day came, He would have answers for her; He would make sense of all her struggles and all her pain.

There are many different reasons for the suffering that we face. Sometimes we experience pain because of our own sin and mistakes. Sometimes it is because of the sin and mistakes of others. There are times when God allows us to face hardships for a purpose. And there are times when the suffering we endure is simply because of the broken reality of our world. God's redemptive work is still unfolding, but is not yet complete. Judy didn't know why she went through so many painful things in her life, but

one thing I think she understood well was that when things seem at their worst, we have to remember that **the story that God is writing, isn't finished yet.**

I have one final interview to share with you today that I think can help draw out this point more deeply. It's an interview with 11-year-old Noah. And before you watch it, I just want you to know that what he shares in the video about what God has been teaching him this year is backed by real life experience. As difficult as COVID has been for everyone this past year, the defining feature of 2020 for Noah and his family had nothing to do with coronavirus. Their year was defined by Noah's grandma, Vi, who got very sick at the beginning of January and went through a dramatic illness. Many of you prayed for Vi this year, as she received medical treatment in three different countries, was air lifted twice, was in a coma for weeks, and spent months in the hospital. And throughout all of that, Noah was learning about the grace God has for us through difficult times. But I'll let him share what he learned, because he says it better! Let's watch:

Interview with Noah Rupp...

*Good always wins (unless it's a cliff-hanger).* Kid's movies always do have a happy ending, don't they? And I have to admit, I like it that way. There are movies out there that don't end well, but I don't tend to enjoy watching them. It can be pretty disconcerting when there isn't a happy ending, and we are hardwired to want everything to work out alright in the end.

Despite the existence of these kinds of movies that seem to end badly, when I heard Noah say that good always wins, unless it's a cliff-hanger, that sentence rang profoundly true to me.

There are things that we face in this life that are truly devastating. And when they happen, it's so easy to feel like good isn't winning. To feel like the darkness is going to swallow us whole.

But "a light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

We run Care groups here at North Park to offer people support and hope in the midst of some of life's most challenging circumstances. When a

marriage fails, or a loved one dies, it is so devastating, it sometimes feels like life can't possibly go on—it feels like the ultimate ending. But it's not, because the story God is writing isn't finished yet. And we see, season after season, that God moves people from despair to hope; and a time of healing and rebuilding begins.

When life gets hard, when things get painful, when it feels like we've hit an ending and it isn't a happy one, we have to remember that it's not the end of the story; we've just hit a cliffhanger.

And folks, I just need to say it—the end of 2020 was a monster of a cliff-hanger. With vaccines on the horizon this past December, there was a brief sense of hope that I think we collectively felt, but as the year ended with COVID-19 cases on the rise, and a lockdown underway, it became clear that the story we've been living since coronavirus first hit is not finished yet.

We're all tired. And I know that there has been a lot this past year that has been beyond our control, but we do have a choice about how we respond to all that has been happening. And as we step forward into 2021, we can be intentional about the part that we're going to play in the story that is unfolding.

So as I wrap up today, I want to leave you with four words that I hope can sum things up well, and help you step forward into 2021 with hope and purpose. The words are—Reflect, Resolve, Redefine, and Remember. Here's what they mean:

First, reflect on what you've been through this year. We've been through a strange and difficult year, and it's important to take some time to reflect on it. And how you think about the year that's behind us will affect how you move forward in the weeks and months ahead. Think about what words have defined your year. Don't hold back from acknowledging the hard things, but as you do, invite God to bring healing and peace to the pain, anxiousness, and hurt that you've experienced this year. Then take some time to celebrate and remember the good—the things you are thankful for, the beautiful moments that you have experienced in the midst of a difficult year, the ways you've seen God at work.

And that brings us to our second word: resolve. This time of year, we make all sorts of resolutions. The New Year always feels like an opportunity for a fresh start, but what if the most important resolution you'll make this year is to resolve to carry forward what God was teaching you throughout 2020? What have you learned that you need to take with you into the year ahead? How has God used the challenges of 2020 to expand your faith, or build your character? Or bring new depth to your soul. What vulnerabilities has this year exposed that can now be addressed because they've been brought into the light? Where have you experienced God's grace and love? Resolve to lean into all of this in the year ahead.

The third word is redefine. Redefine what it means to put your trust in God. Remember the great things God has done; throughout history, in your own life, and in the lives of others. Remember that He is faithful and good and mighty to save. Remove the 'as long as' clauses from your relationship with God, and trust him, even when things get difficult. Trust Him especially when things get difficult because we need God to get through these hard times with hope.

Finally, our last word is remember. Remember that the story isn't finished yet. When you're hurting. When you're struggling. When it seems like you've hit the end of the story and it just isn't a good ending, it isn't because God isn't good. It isn't because God is not in control. It isn't because God has forgotten about you. It is because you've hit a cliffhanger. The story isn't finished—God's work is not complete, and the story of redemption that He is writing is bigger than our current circumstances.

So Reflect on all that you've been through this past year  
Resolve to carry forward what God has been teaching you  
Redefine what it means to put your trust in Him  
And Remember that the story isn't finished yet.

Let's pray:

*God, each one of us has found this past year challenging in our own way. But we know that you have been present with us through it all. We thank you for the many ways that we have experienced your grace and mercy and love this past year. As we*

*look ahead to 2021, we ask for your help and your wisdom as we step forward from here. Show us how to trust and rely on you through the challenges that lie ahead, and we pray that you would use us to be your hands and feet in the world. God, continue shaping us and moving us to be a transforming and life giving presence in our families, our communities and the world.*

*Amen!*

### **Closing and Benediction**

2020 was a cliffhanger. And it's got me thinking about one of the greatest cliffhangers of all time—the cross. When Jesus died, you can just imagine what that must have felt like for his disciples, the ones who had dropped everything to follow Him. Now, Jesus, the one they had hoped would lead a revolution that would bring freedom and justice for the oppressed, was gone. It felt like an ending. But the story that God was writing wasn't finished yet. Resurrection was coming, and the revolution Christ came to lead was bigger than just redemption for one group of people at a specific time and place in history; it was a revolution that would stretch across eternity for all people.

Because Christ died and rose again, overcoming sin and death and making a way to reconcile all of humanity to the Father, we can endure the hardships that come our way with hope, knowing that whatever happens, the end of the story is a good one—God has already won. There may be cliffhangers along the way, we might face hard times, and we may struggle, but our hope isn't in our present circumstances, our hope is in eternity. We are following a God who loves us deeply. He is with us, He is for us, He has gone to great lengths to redeem us, and He is inviting us to be a part of his redemptive work—to be a light to our world as we step forward into the year ahead of us.

As our service today comes to a close, I'd like to pray this blessing over you:

### **Ephesians 3:16-21**

*I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,<sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established*

*in love,<sup>18</sup> may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,<sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

*<sup>20</sup> Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,<sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

## **Points to Ponder**

### **Standalone Sermon**

#### **2020 Was a Cliffhanger...**

**January 3, 2021**

1. When you think back on the past year, what one word would you use to describe your experience of 2020?
2. What are you eager to leave behind as you begin a new year?
3. What do you need to carry forward with you into 2021? How has God worked in your life this past year? How has He used the challenges of 2020 to expand your faith or build your character? Where have you experienced God's grace and love? What has been teaching you this year?
4. Have you found it difficult to trust in God this past year? What kind of expectations do you have of God? Are you able to trust God even when things are difficult?
5. Can you think of something God has done, in your life or in the lives of others, that you can remember to help you anchor into a sense of his goodness and love?
6. What cliffhangers have you experienced in your life? What good endings are you waiting and hoping for in the midst of your current struggles? How do you feel about the idea that some of the good endings God has promised will not be experienced until heaven?

#### **Prayer and Action Item:**

As you think about the four words—Reflect, Resolve, Redefine, and Remember—outlined at the end of the sermon, which do you feel drawn to focus on as 2021 begins?

Pray for one another based on your reflections of these words.