

FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Major News Events of 2016

Our days often pass so quickly that it's difficult to remember what happened last month, let alone one year ago. Today as we begin the new year, we have the chance to review and reflect on what important events have happened in the past year, both in our personal lives and in public life.

While books could be written on all the events that have affected our nation and world in 2016, here are some of the most prominent:

- In the winter, news broke of the rapid spread of the Zika virus in Brazil and of its possible link to microcephaly in newborns. Here in the United States, a state of emergency was declared by the state of Michigan because of contaminated drinking water in Flint. The death of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia led to the Supreme Court only having eight of its nine Justice positions filled for the remainder of the year, after Senate Republicans announced they would not confirm any nomination made by President Obama.

- In the spring, the world was rocked by a series of terrorist attacks. In a single week in March, at least 149 people were killed in four separate attacks in Lahore, Pakistan; Iskandariyah, Iraq; Brussels, Belgium; and Istanbul, Turkey. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for three of the four attacks, with the Pakistan attack being carried out by a Sunni militant group.

- During the summer, many across the world were surprised by the outcome of a British election in which a majority voted for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. In the United States, Philando Castile was fatally shot by police in a traffic stop, and his fiancé began live streaming on Facebook seconds after the shooting. The same week, an ambush of Dallas police officers during a peaceful demonstration against police brutality ended with five officers dead and seven additional officers injured. While economic and health concerns about the Rio Olympics

Looking back at the events of 2016 offers opportunities for spiritual reflection and reclaiming the hope of our faith. How can our faith help us as we reflect on the events of 2016 and begin the new year with hope?

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Core Bible Passage: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

This Sunday's lectionary passages remind us that we aren't the first people to live through painful and tumultuous events. In **Ecclesiastes 3:1-13**, the ancient teacher of wisdom declares, "There's a season for everything, and a time for every matter under the heavens." Reflecting on this passage, the Reverend Dr. Joanna Adams says, "Knowing what time it is differentiates the foolish from the wise. Some hold on for dear life to that which is actually finished and done."

Birth and death, planting and uprooting, searching and losing, embracing and solitude, war and peace, are all a part of the human experience in every place at some time. Adams cautions that though the writer of **Ecclesiastes** acknowledges the existence of hate and war in our world, we shouldn't "think for a minute that he is condoning either. He is simply stating the fact."

As people of faith, how can we be realistic about the existence of pain, death, and hatred without allowing our acknowledgement of these things to make us complacent? How can we choose to let go of things that have passed and gone rather than cling to false hopes? How can we find the joy in each day, experiencing what the writer of **Ecclesiastes** calls "the gift of God: that all people should eat, drink, and enjoy the results of their hard work" (**verse 13**)?

dominated its coverage before the actual event, the games went on without any major hitches.

- In the fall, China and the United States, the world's two largest carbon producers, joined other nations in ratifying the Paris climate agreement. About 600 Haitians died in Hurricane Matthew, and tens of thousands of people were left homeless there because of the storm. The Colombian government and the guerrilla group FARC signed a peace agreement, formally ending a half-century conflict that had left more than 220,000 people dead. The tumultuous and divisive US presidential election ended in Donald Trump being elected president, to the surprise of many pollsters.

"Do Not Fear, For I Am With You"

"Do not fear, for I am with you," declares **Isaiah 41:10** (NRSV). "Do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."

I take comfort in these words. Yet when I consider many of the things our country and world experienced in 2016 and how these experiences might continue to play out this year, one of my first emotions is fear.

Fear that hate speech and attacks on vulnerable people that spiked after the US election will continue. Fear that when natural disasters strike the poorest nations, the world will not respond with enough generosity and justice. Fear that the actions of ISIS militants, as well as "self-radicalized" terrorists, will cause more of our brothers and sisters around the world to die. Fear that we will not adequately confront the crisis of persistent racism in our country. Fear that proposed policy changes will lead to refugees being turned away and people who are poor losing access to critical services that allow them to survive.

Yet these very fears, and other concerns about the year ahead, offer the chance to deepen our trust in God and to discern our calling. Through our journeys of prayer, dialogue, relationship, and faithful action, God is present with us, leading us from fear to hope.

Looking Forward in Hope

The hope that Christians proclaim isn't one that says nothing bad will happen to us or to others. Rather, it's a hope that declares that God is still at work within the world and even works through us.

In her book *Becoming Wise*, religious journalist Krista Tippett says that hope "has nothing to do with wishing. It references reality at every turn and reveres truth. . . . Hope, like every virtue, is a choice that becomes a practice that becomes spiritual muscle memory. It's a renewable resource for moving through life as it is, not as we wish it to be."

Perhaps one of the most important questions to consider as we begin 2017 is what practices in our life nourish hope and which

“Look for the Helpers”

Fred Rogers, famous for creating and hosting the preschool show *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, said, “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’” Even in 2016’s tragedies, people were present who were ready to show compassion and to offer solidarity to the suffering.

After the horrific shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in just one day 5,300 people showed up to donate blood. Landlord Christian West Howard opened up several of his rental properties for free to family members of victims who needed a place to stay. A crowdfunding page initiated by a group of Muslims in Orlando raised more than \$100,000 for victims’ families.

When Westboro Baptist Church called for its members to protest victims’ funerals by being present with antigay signs, members of the Orlando Shakespeare Theater had a creative solution to allow mourners to “grieve in peace.” They encircled the grieving, dressed as angels with wings so large that they shielded mourners from viewing the hatefully worded signs. Participant Jeannie Haskett said, “I don’t have money to give, but I can spread love and I can spread hope. I was just waiting for an opportunity to use one thing I do have, which is the skill to sew.”

ones diminish hope. For example, columnist Jana Reiss discovered that in the weeks after the presidential election, fasting from Facebook became a spiritual practice, allowing her more time for prayer and reading “actual books.”

Deepening our face-to-face relationships with others, not just those who are like us but especially those we have differences with, can become a surprising source of hope. Serving others in a spirit of learning and humility also causes us to work our spiritual hope muscles. Advocating for peace and justice in the face of violence and inequality can nourish hope, especially when we remember that God’s call is to be faithful even when we’re not successful.

Discerning Kairos Moments in 2017

In the Greek language, there are two words for time: *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos time* is chronological time that can be measured by tools such as clocks and calendars. *Kairos time* is the right or opportune time for something to be done, including the right time for God to act. As blogger Ardis Nelson points out, the birth of Jesus was such a kairos moment, “so significant that it separated chronological time into B.C. and A.D.”

One way to become ready for the kairos moments that God will present to us this year is to reflect on what those moments may have been in 2016. Which moments in your life seemed like opportune times through which God used you in service to others? In the major events of our nation and world, where did you see people responding to God’s kairos moments? Who were the people who, in the face of crisis, sensed God’s call to reach out to others in compassion and courage? Who spoke God’s truth when it was challenging to hear?

The lectionary’s Gospel lesson for this Sunday is **Matthew 25:31-46**. In this passage, Jesus tells of the day of judgment when the sheep will be separated from the goats. The sheep are those people who, without even realizing it, have ministered to the Son of Man by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the prisoners. The goats are those who, without knowing it, turned away from the Son of Man’s need by failing to welcome the stranger, give the thirsty something to drink, or visit those who are sick or in prison.

This year will undoubtedly provide us—as individuals, as churches, and as communities—with countless opportunities to minister to Christ through relationships with our sisters and brothers in need. Relationships with people who are most vulnerable, the very people in whom Jesus told us that his presence can best be known, prepare us to sense kairos moments when God particularly needs us to act.

May God prepare our hearts, minds, and hands for the kairos moments of 2017.

Core Bible Passage: Revelation 21:1-6a

Revelation 21 is a vision of the renewal of both heaven and earth. “I heard a loud voice from the throne say, ‘Look! God’s dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (verses 3-4).

Reflecting on this passage, the Reverend Danny Quanstrom writes that while many assume that **Revelation** has “an otherworldly or escapist theological bent,” this passage shows the hollowness of that interpretation. “As we’re coming to the culmination of the Revelation we see that it’s not about us being pulled away from this earth, it’s about God drawing close to this earth!”

In this passage, God’s promise of comfort for us is not that we will be whisked away to heaven, while others are left behind to suffer. Instead, God makes a home among us, renewing the earth and putting an end to death, mourning, and pain.

In **verse 5**, God goes on to declare, “Look! I’m making all things new.” The faithful must make a choice: Will we join God in this new creation?

Methodism’s New Year Traditions

John Wesley encouraged Methodists to partake in prayer and the renewing of our commitment to God through watch night services held on New Year’s Eve. Wesley learned this tradition from Moravian Christians, in which the faithful spent the last hours of the year “wrestling with God in prayer,” according to the book *The Story of the Hymns and Tunes*, by Theron Brown and Hezekiah Butterworth.

Some United Methodist churches have continued this tradition. Enoila Woodard, worshiper at a watch night service in Houston, said, “It’s a tradition with my mother and father. . . . We’re always on our knees when the clock strikes twelve.”

The watch night service took on special significance for African American Christians on December 31, 1862. Worshipers gathered that particular New Year’s Eve to pray, offer thanksgiving, and wait for the stroke of midnight when the Emancipation Proclamation would take effect, officially freeing enslaved people.

One common element of the watch night service is the covenant prayer. The renewal of this covenant requires participants to commit themselves to God. The Reverend Daniel Benedict explains, “From time to time, Christians need to make a solemn renewal of the covenant, lest we hold back from God what we once gave to God but over time have hoarded for ourselves.”

Helpful Links

- Getty Images has compiled 144 pictures that review 2016’s most significant events at <http://tiny.cc/goluhv>.
- Learn more about the Methodist watch night tradition in an article in *The Los Angeles Times* at <http://tiny.cc/5uluhv>.

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2016: Looking Back/Looking Forward

How can our faith help us as we reflect on the events of 2016 and begin the new year with hope?

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your group members and your group time, choose from among the OPEN, EXPLORE, and CLOSE activities or from "Teaching Alternatives" to plan the session.

OPEN the Session

Pray Together

Pray aloud (or sing if you prefer) the first verse of the hymn "Many Gifts, One Spirit" (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 114).

Remember Significant Events

Invite participants to name aloud one or two of the most significant events that took place in 2016 in their personal lives or in the world. Ask: How did you respond to these events? How did you see God at work in these events?

EXPLORE the Topic

Consider the Impact of News Events

Review the section "Major News Events of 2016." Ask participants if there are other important national or global events from the year that they would include in this list. Discuss whether there are any commonalities or themes that you sense across the different events around the world. Ask: What do these events tell us about the hopes, concerns, and fears of people in the United States and around the globe? What do you think our Christian faith offers to the experience of these events?

Do a Bible Study of Ecclesiastes

Ask a participant to read aloud Ecclesiastes 3:1-13. Referring to "Core Bible Passage: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13," discuss the following questions: Does Joanna Adams's caution that the writer is stating the existence of war and hate, not condoning them, change your understanding of this passage? Why or why not? How can people of faith be realistic about the existence of things like war and hate without throwing up our hands and thinking that nothing can be done? What are some ways that we can find joy even in the midst of suffering?

Remember the Helpers

Read aloud the quote by Fred Rogers found at the beginning of "Look for the Helpers." Ask the group to discuss where they have seen people who were helping in the midst of tragedy or behaving with courage in the face of fear. Ask: How does seeing helpers in action affect your understanding of tragic events? How can we find ways to be a helper this year? What can we do to act lovingly in the midst of hatred?

Discuss Hope and Fear

Review highlights of the sections "Do Not Fear, For I Am With You," and "Looking Forward in Hope." Invite the group to form pairs to discuss the following questions: As you look forward into 2017, are you more inclined to be hopeful or fearful? Why? Are

there any practices you've found that help you move from fear into hope (for example, prayer or talking with a particular person)? Are there ways that you can incorporate more of these practices into your life this year? In what ways do you think these practices can make a difference to you?

Explore the Watch Night Tradition

Review the section "Methodism's New Year Traditions." Ask the group to talk about whether they have heard of or participated in a New Year's Eve watch night service. Ask: How might participating in this type of service change our understanding of what the new year is about? Ask them to read "A Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition" (*Hymnal*, 607). Ask: How might this prayer shape your Christian journey in 2017?

Do a Bible Study of Revelation

Before reading aloud the Scripture Revelation 21:1-6a, ask participants to sum up, in just one sentence, what they've been told the Book of Revelation is about. Without taking time to discuss these summaries yet, read the passage aloud. Ask: Does this passage fit with what you've been told about the meaning of Revelation? Why or why not?

Read the sidebar "Core Bible Passage: Revelation 21:1-6a." Ask: Does thinking about God drawing close to this earth, rather than drawing us away from the earth, affect how you think about world events? What hope does this Scripture passage offer to us?

Consider Kairos Time

Refer to the section "Discerning *Kairos* Moments in 2017." Ask the group to talk about the following: What is the difference between *chronos time* and *kairos time*? Have you ever experienced a particular time as especially significant and set apart from normal time? When did you see other people responding to an opportune time to witness to God's truth and love in 2016? How can people of faith prepare themselves to participate in *kairos* moments that may appear this year?

CLOSE the Session

Pray Together

Pray the following together, or use a prayer of your own choosing:
God of hope, we confess that as we consider the past year and look forward to the future, we sometimes let fear, despair, and complacency overcome us. Fix our eyes upon you and your promise of a kingdom in which pain and mourning are no more. Help us to discern the particular moments when you call us, as individuals and as your church, to participate with you in the renewal of the creation. Guide us into a deeper life of discipleship with your Son Jesus Christ in the coming year. Amen.

Teaching Alternatives

- If your church hasn't already held a watch night service, discuss with your pastor about having some type of covenant renewal service, either for your group or the entire congregation. Keep in mind that the covenant being made is a solemn one, and participants should be prepared for this ahead of time.
- Use "Getty Image's News Year in Review 2016" to guide a discussion of the past year (see "Helpful Links" to find the images). These photographs would best be viewed on a large screen. Ask: How does seeing these images, rather than simply talking about the events, affect your understanding of the past year?

Next Week in
FaithLink
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Fracking

Recent earthquakes in Oklahoma have raised concerns about the process known as fracking. What is fracking, and how is it connected to seismic activity? How are institutions and communities responding? How does Christian faith inform our responses to fracking?