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## God of the Coming Years

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*Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9*

Every time you type an emoji, you are doing a very Pittsburgh thing.

Emojis began in Pittsburgh. It is true. The granddaddy of all emojis was the sideways smiling face, the one you make by typing a colon, a hyphen, and a parenthesis mark, that curves the opposite way of a letter c. There you have it, a sideways smiling face. :-)

The year was 1982; the month, September. The place was Carnegie Mellon University's computer science lab.

And the originator was Scott E. Fahlman, a professor at CMU — who, by the way, is now retired and lives just a few blocks from Shadyside Presbyterian Church. Some of you probably know him.

It was Professor Fahlman who suggested the sideways smile :-)) as a way of saying — in short hand — “just kidding” or “don't take it seriously.”

In the same post, he also suggested the use of the symbol with the parenthesis facing the opposite direction :-(( to indicate that a message was meant to be taken seriously, though that symbol quickly evolved into a marker for displeasure, frustration, or anger.

I suppose if you wanted, you could let the world know whether today is a “smiling face day” for you, or the other kind — whether the day is to be lighthearted, or taken seriously. It really depends on what direction your parenthesis is curving.

When you think about **the coming years**, which way does your parenthesis curve — into a smile or into a frown? Have you made plans for next year and ten years from now? Have you thought about how you will spend them? What will be the same, and what will be different from now?

Here is an interesting truth: God is with you. God is going to be with you throughout this day. God is with you in each coming day and each coming year.

This does not mean that it will be a piece of cake. Nevertheless, the general truth that you can take with you into the remainder of this day is that you aren't going it alone. You aren't tackling it alone. You have help in the Almighty.

As our Scripture says:

*“In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials ... even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him, and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”*

The message invites us to take the long view of history — our personal history, and the history of the world. It says that while there may be days when all the emojis are frowning, the whole tenor of a Christian's life is that the emojis are smiling and will forevermore smile.

It is, of course, easy to challenge such theology — to insist that things are bad and can only get worse.

Certainly that is how Christ's first followers must have felt on that first Easter Saturday. And who could blame them? The situation was bleak, because Jesus had been crucified — dead — and buried. The rock-hewn tomb, with the heavy stone rolled against it to keep it shut, was a bold and solid reminder that things were very bad indeed.

If that were the end of the story, we would not be the Church, and the whole world would be wearing a frown emoji all of the time. There would be no reason to smile. But the fact of the matter is, that is not the end of the story.

Easter came. Jesus arose. Jesus is alive now and forevermore.

There are situations where we can feel so overwhelmed and threatened that it is hard to remember that fact. COVID-19 is one of these. Those are precisely the moments when our only hope lies in looking beyond — beyond the darkness, beyond the gloom, and beyond the gravity of disease, death, and disappointment. There are moments when our comfort is in being reassured that ultimately we shall not be abandoned — that life and love shall overcome death and hate.

My grandfather commuted to and from work, here in Pittsburgh, along one of our commuting roadways, in the days before limited access roads were commonplace. The commute was never easy — and still isn't — but I believe it was somewhat worse then, than it is now. At any rate, for a while, he was part of a carpool. And one of the other drivers in the carpool was not known for his driving skill. Quite the opposite. In fact, driving with him was a bit like a ride on the wild mouse. Yet another person in the car had a droll way of putting things.

After one particularly hair-raising close call, she blurted out: "I know that heaven's my home, but I ain't homesick yet!"

Maybe you feel that way. Maybe that is part of what forms your faith. You know that heaven is your home; but you are not homesick yet.

Sometimes **the coming years** seem like oncoming cars — coming at you way too fast and in much too rapid succession. I understand that. And in **the coming years**, you may have in your mind's eye an idea that what is coming is worrisome. I understand that, too. So, when I hear what I read in our Scripture passage today, it serves for me as a corrective for those kinds of fears.

What Peter is saying here is that we need not fear **the coming years**. That even though they may seem challenging, we know already that we will be the victors. That our faith will see us through. Not only see us through, but find us in a state of everlasting joy and peace — and love.

The way our faith is expressed in these passages from 1 Peter has a strong eschatological emphasis. It is concerned with the ultimate, final events of history, or the ultimate, final destiny of humanity. We sometimes speak of it as the "end times" or the "end of the world."

Faith that is faith lives toward the future, leans into the future, trusts the future to God, and trusts that the end times will all be in God's hands — God's loving hands.

We know that the future has been revealed to us in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave. We know that the love of God is eternal.

The authenticity of our faith is proven in the ways we express the love of God, now and always. So yes, the genuineness of our faith may be tested. Even so, it is, as our Scripture reminds us, "*more precious than gold.*" Like gold refined by fire, faith is made purer and more precious because of the tests and trials we endure.

For Peter, the metaphor is one of the devotion of the heart to God, both as it is refined, and also in the joy it produces.

This is faith. This is life in Christ. This is what 1 Peter is all about.

### What does a living hope look like?

A living hope looks like facing each new day with confidence. A living hope looks like grace under pressure. A living hope looks like finding the best in a situation. A living hope looks like working with others for a solution. A living hope looks like celebrating the blessings that come one's way — small and large — and sharing those blessings as best we can. A living hope looks like being grateful and saying so. A living hope looks at today as a rare and wonderful thing. A living hope looks at **the coming years** as something to be embraced, rather than feared.

I have a friend who does not doubt that the sun will come up in the east tomorrow; that spring will follow winter; that gardens will grow and produce flowers and fruit; that hard work will bring about good results; that kindness is worth it, no matter the response; that sunshine will follow the rain.

And yet, this friend has his doubts about, as he calls it, “all this God business.”

I ask you to say a prayer for him, and all who are like him, today. Pray that the love of God will become real to him — will warm his heart, and fill his mind, in such a way that he will find the kind of joy about which Peter writes.

Pray that he will have the same assurance you have: that God’s loving intentions for us all are good, and all contained in the message of Jesus, who was dead, but is now alive forevermore and who promises the same “*indescribable and glorious joy*,” for all who trust in Him. Amen.