

Sermon on "What a wonderful world" by Louis Armstrong, New Years Day 2006.01.01

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

A certain king had two servants. To the first he said, "I want you to travel for six months through my kingdom and bring back a sample of every weed you can find." To the second servant the king said, "I want you to travel through my kingdom for six months and bring back a sample of every flower you can find." Six months later, both servants stood before the king. To the first, the king asked, "Have you carried out my command?" The first servant answered, "I have, and I was amazed to find there were so many weeds in the kingdom. In fact, there is nothing but weeds in this kingdom!" - To the king's question the second servant also answered, "I have, and I am amazed how many beautiful flowers there are in the kingdom. In fact, there is nothing but beautiful flowers in this kingdom!"

These two servants each found what they were looking for. So do we.

And this is the topic of this Sermon: How do we want to start this New Year? Isn't it s, that by the end of the year 2006 we have found what we've been looking for? I am sure when we balance the books at year end we will have exactly the results, we predict, meaning: If you say, what good can be there, there will be only weed, sure enough you end up with a big pile in your backyard.

And this is exactly what I would like to talk about for a few minutes: How do we arrive at a positive attitude towards life?

I thought the song you just heard might help us. Does somebody know the song's name? (What a wonderful world.)

Listen to the Text: What a Wonderful World (George David Weiss and Bob Thiele)

*I see trees of green..... red roses too
I watch 'em bloom..... for me and for you
And I think to myself.... what a wonderful world.*

*I see skies of blue..... clouds of white
Bright blessed days....warm sacred nights
And I think to myselfwhat a wonderful world.*

*The colors of a rainbow.....so pretty ..in the sky
Are there on the faces.....of people ..going by
I see friends shaking hands.....sayin'.. how do you do
They're really sayin'.....I love you.*

*I hear babies cry..... I watch them grow
They'll learn much more.....than I'll never know
And I think to myselfwhat a wonderful world*

Bob Thiele and George David have written this song. It was first recorded and published in 1968.

Do you know what kind of year 1968 was? I'll give you some facts. In 1968:

- North Korea seizes US Navy ship *Pueblo*; holds 83 on board as spies (Jan. 23).

- The war in Vietnam reached a turning point:
- North Vietnamese launch the Tet Offensive, a turning point in the Vietnam War (Jan.-Feb.).
- American soldiers massacre 347 civilians at My Lai (March 16).
- Martin Luther King, Jr., civil rights leader, is slain in Memphis (April 4). And his murderer James Earl Ray sentenced to 99 years in Prison
- Sen. Robert F. Kennedy is shot and critically wounded in Los Angeles hotel after winning California primary (June 5)—dies June 6. Background: Timeline of Kennedy tragedies
- Czechoslovakia is invaded by Russians and Warsaw Pact forces to crush liberal regime (Aug. 20).
- John Coltrane died, that might be of special interest for the Jazz Band, John Coltrane was one of the most influential Sax players.
- Woody Guthrie gave also up his spirit in that year.
- Green Bay won the Super Bowl; and Montreal the Stanley Cup. I am not sure whether the last fact is good or bad news.

And I think to myself.... what a wonderful world. – A wonderful world?

It might surprise you, that the song was intended as an antidote for the increasingly racially and politically charged climate in the U.S. and written specifically for Armstrong, who had broad crossover appeal, the song details the singer's delight in the simple enjoyment of everyday life. Ironically, the song was not initially a hit in the States but was a major success in the UK. The song gradually became something of a standard.

There might be some – as we say in German – “staatlich-geprüfte Bedenkenträger” – translated into English: “Government approved concerners” who would right away say: That is crazy? How can someone in the eye of such conflicts, in times of war, in the year were the most influential civil rights movement figure, Martin Luther King was killed, sing a song called: What a wonderful world? That’s not a wonderful world; that is a terrible world!

People might judge Louis Armstrong’s approach as naïve; but what you should know is that he was the strongest financial supporter of Martin Luther King. He contributed thousands and thousands of dollars for his campaigns. Armstrong himself did not speak up against segregation and racism very often, but the world listened when in 1957 he labeled U.S. President Eisenhower as double-faced and gutless, because he had not taken a clear stand for equality during a conflict over school segregation in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Satchmo, as he was nicknamed, was often criticized of being too schmoozy with his predominantly white audience. I do not know whether this is true or not. But what I know is that he knew exactly what was going on in society, because he had to live through all of it. He came from a dirt poor family in New Orleans. He grew up in a part of the city which was called the “Battlefield”. The only way out, was music. He was certainly very talented and became as a young man the band leader of the most popular bands in the city. He followed his former band leader Joe “King” Oliver in the 1920s to Chicago, which was the capitol of Jazz in that time. Later on, in the 40s he settled down in New York and toured the country and the world. He maintained a busy performing schedule until he died, with at times over 300 gigs a year. He died on July 6, 1979 after a heart attack at the age of presumably 69 years of age. *Satchmo* or *Pops* – that was his other nickname – was not exactly sure, when he was born. He celebrated July 4 at his birthday and often said that he was born in 1900 instead of 1902, but it does not really matter.

And I think to myself.... what a wonderful world.

There is one little word in this refrain which catches my attention: It is the word 'think'. There is a distinction between first reaction and a thought-throw approach to the world we live in. Let me explain it to you: Do you know the saying: It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness?

What the bible is all about - and now I try to connect a few dots here - is to tell people about the light of this world. It is in the prophecies of the Old Testament, like Isaiah: *'The people who walk in the darkness have seen a great light...'* It is in the New Testament where Jesus said about himself: *'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'*

What do we as God's people do with his promise to light up our life? Either we forget about it or we do not trust it completely. There is always this doubt in the back of our mind, saying: Yaah, right, if he only would know what I m going through, if he only knew what this world looks like...!

Yesterday, I told people in my sermon that if there is anyone who knows what is going on, it is God. He looks right through the façade and he cries over this world and the human stupidity every day. So what do we do with it? Give up, become bitter or ironic? And, by the way, isn't this an ironic song: What a wonderful world...? – No it is not. Armstrong does something which is extremely important and by the way very often God's job, or the prophet's job, or the leaders of Israel's job to remind people, that life is not only dark and grim and disappointing. There are two things you ca do in spite of all the worries and problems of this world: a) Light a candle and b) remind people that there is light.

Two last things:

When in WWII during a stage performance of Rigoletto for American GI's the light went out in an Italian Opera House and everything fell completely dark. One GI took out his flashlight and pointed it in the direction of the stage. That did not do any good. But when the other 499 soldiers did the same thing, the performance could continue.

God takes out a flashlight again this year. It is the watchword for 2006:

"I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you."

This is said to Joshua, the son of Nun, the successor of Moses, the one who was supposed to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. There was only one tiny little problem: There were already people living in this country, plus, problem No. 2, the Israelites were the inventors of complaining. Man, they were a bunch of negative critics, hard to please and always on the brink to throw the towel. Joshua makes a realistic assessment of his situation and must have thought by himself: God must be kidding. This is the least job I wanted; and how, on earth, do I know how to handle a situation like this?" - And this is God's answer: *"I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you."*

I want you to know that this promise was renewed through Jesus Christ and is still valid. Jesus said: *I am with you always until the end of the ages.* Now, if we think for a moment, if we do not let ourselves be discouraged by all the mess out there, if we knew that we walk this planet with the God of the universe at our side, promising us to be our light; if we than knew at the same time that it is not our small tiny light alone which needs to light all of the darkness, but that there are others, too, who let there light shine, who bring happiness and joy, comfort and peace, we have a realistic chance to see how wonderful this world really is. And if we are ready in 2006 not only to count the weed in ours and our neighbour's garden, but to look for all the beautiful flowers out there, we can hopefully say as the servant in the story: In fact, there is nothing but beautiful flowers in this – in God's - kingdom! Amen.

And the Peace of God which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.