The (Legacy) Game of Life Memory Verse: 1 Peter 2:21b

December 31, 2023 Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

SLIDE 1: TITLE

 Good morning church. I am willing to say it a little early: Happy New Year! It is indeed a happy new year when we think of the mercy and grace that God has lavishly poured upon us. And we remember too, that God walks with us into this new year. That is what Christmas is all about. And maybe you are thinking to yourself, you know, this last year wasn’t all that great, why should I have high hopes for this one? And that’s a fair position. The answer to the question about high hopes all depends upon where it is that you are placing your hope.

 As we think about hope I want to usher you into the deep, dark world of board games. And every board game involves hope, because you hope, in the end, to be the winner of the game. That is the whole point of a game. Sometimes fun is involved, but winning is why I play games. Everybody needs a hobby, and mine is board games. Some might say that, for me, it is not a hobby, it is a problem.

**SLIDE 2: Pastor Andrew’s house**

If you have been to my house, you will see shelves and shelves filled with board games, literally hundreds of games. What is wrong with me? I just think games are fun, and each one is different. Instead of looking at a painting or watching a movie, or even reading a book, a game is an interactive piece of art. You get to play it, and as you do you almost get to enter into the mind of the creator of the game.

Thankfully my wife enjoys playing a good game with me and she has said, “Games are like life.” What she means is that in a game you have to make decisions in order to win. You need to carefully weigh out your options…should I play this card, or that card? Should I move here or there? Each decision impacts the game. But on top of decisions, most games involve some amount of luck, be it dice rolling or random card draws. This speaks to the uncontrollable aspects of our lives. Sometimes, even with the best, most carefully laid plans, even with the most thought through strategies, things do not turn out due to some unlucky factor. But the third way games reflect real life is in the rulebook. Every game has rules. There is a purpose to the pieces and the images on the board. The rules allow the inanimate game bits to interact with the mind of the players to produce a fun experience, in which, I hopefully win! But the fun experience is totally dependent on the rules and the fact that all players need to follow those rules. And in order to follow them, players need to know the rules in the first place.

There is a genre of games that is fairly new to me. I have only played a few. They are known as legacy games. And a legacy game actually changes slightly over each play. For a simple example, take a look at a game called My City.

**SLIDE 3 -4: MY CITY**

In this game you simply flip a card, it shows a shape and you add the shaped piece to your map. In the end you score points for trees and negative points for rocks. It’s a very simply concept, but after each game, you are instructed to change your board by adding various types of stickers. Or sometimes the game will add new pieces. So now the next game is slightly different. Of course, over the course of 25 games, you end up with a very different board then what you started with. In a legacy game, your decisions not only affect the outcome of that one play, they actually affect your future games moving forward. And what does that sound like? I think that sounds a lot like life.

So if our life is a legacy game, if our decisions affect our future, then, in order to do well, in order to claim victory, what we need is a strategy. So, on the eve of this brad new year, I would like to present you a winning strategy for this legacy game of life, a game in which your decisions matter because they affect more than just today.

Of course in order to develop any good strategy we need to begin with the rulebook. How does this game work? And most importantly, how is the final score tallied? How do we know who wins?

**SLIDE 5: BIBLE**

We are going to take a look at our rulebook for life: the Bible. It includes a summary of the rules which we all know as the 10 Commandments. The 10 Commandments are found in a few different places in the bible, and we are going to turn to Deuteronomy chapter 5. Deuteronomy is a word that literally means “second law” or in this case, the law presented again. Deuteronomy is basically Moses reviewing all the things God said and commanded. He is going over the rules before the game begins in earnest. He wants to make sure all the players are on the same page and understand how this game works. And as Moses reviews the 10 commandments, he uses a phrase that repeats a total of nine times in Deuteronomy alone. You know, sometimes in rulebooks, you will see really important rules highlighted or printed in bold letters…and this is exactly the function of repetition in the Hebrew bible, to highlight what is being said. So as I read these familiar words, see if you can pick out the phrase that Moses will end up using again and again. READ Deut. 5:6-21 (Generation = legacy).

**SLIDE 6-8: Deut. 5:6-21**

So these are the rules of the game. Know them, obey them, use them to form a winning strategy and things will go well for you. That is the phrase by the way. Moses highlights over and over gain that God’s desire is that things may go well for us. But if we insist on playing by our own rules, then things will not go well for us. We cannot hope to do well in the game, let alone win the game if we are not willing to engage this life according to the rules God has provided.

So we have the summery of the rules, we can get a good idea of how to live by them. We see throughout the Old Testament, godly people trying to follow God’s laws, and then when the New Testament comes around, we call these lovers of the rules “pharisees” and they end up getting a bad wrap. Jesus himself has some very tough words for these rule followers. But really they are just trying to play the game as best they can.

But one of my favorite aspects about board games is something called depth. After a play or two, you can start to see how decisions work together, you can better understand how functions of the game affect one another.

**SLIDE 9: CHESS**

 Take chess for example. A simple game with simple rules. Each type of piece moves in a specific way and all you have to do is capture the king. It is such an easy game to learn, and yet one could play it and study it for years and years because each decision in the game has so much depth. And like many games, the more you play, the better you will be. So I will approach my first game of chess much differently than I would my 100th game of chess, because I am familiar with the depth of the game, the game underneath the game so to speak.

Jesus calls us to the depth of life. We have rules to follow, and once we know the rules, we begin to engage the game itself. Jesus shows us how to do that. It is the difference between reading through a rule book by yourself trying to understand a new game and sitting down at a table with someone who can teach you the rules and answer questions you might have and even give you some tips on what makes a good strategy and, most helpfully, to see some examples of what might happen. Jesus us there to ensure that it will go well with you.

So we might say, the Pharisees were not great chess players. They knew the rules but they missed the depth that the game offers. They were stuck with their noses in the rule book and never really played the game; they never truly lived life.

**SLIDE : 1 Peter 2:21**

1 Peter 2:21 says this, “You were called to this kind of endurance,” Here he refers to being persecuted for doing good. “…because Christ suffered on your behalf. He left you an example so that you might follow in his footsteps.” We would say that Jesus played this game of life perfectly. He knew the rules, he understood the weight of his decisions, he felt the depth of the game and he came out victorious! He won, which, as I’ve said, is the whole point. We follow his example: Peter goes on, “He committed no sin, nor did he ever speak in ways meant to deceive. When he was insulted, he did not reply with insults. When he suffered, he did not threaten revenge. Instead, he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.” That is quite the example to follow: no sin, no lies, no insulting or revenge and he entrusted himself to God. Now comes the part that we cannot do, the place where we cannot follow.

SLIDE 11: 1 Peter 2:24-25

Verse 24: “He carried in his own body on the cross the sins we committed. He did this so that we might live in righteousness, having nothing to do with sin.” So Jesus empowers us to live out the example he set for us. He did not sin, we do sin. He did not break the rules, we do. But he took upon himself our wrongdoing, our sin, so that we would have nothing to do with sin. So that we could be like him. Peter goes on in verse 24, “By his wounds you were healed. Though you were like straying sheep,” that is; lost and losing, ignorant of any decent strategy, hopelessly terrible at the game and unable to get any points on the board, “You have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your lives.” And we can trust that when you are with your good shepherd, things will go well for you.

And what about the final score? Who wins this game called life? Well, the bad news is, that like most games, there can only be one winner, and it’s not going to be any of us. But the good news is that the One who wins is willing to share the victory! Matthew 7:21-23 records the words of Jesus himself, who is the winner in case you didn’t know. He says: READ

**SLIDE 12: Matthew 7:21-23**

So in the final scoring, we see here, from the mouth of Jesus, there are severe consequences of this game we play. There is entrance to the kingdom of heaven on the line. The other option is defeat, complete and utter separation, to be shut out from that kingdom. That might sound harsh, and I actually hope it does, because the reality will more than sound harsh. The stakes are so high. To lose is to be eternally separated from God, from life, from joy. But, the really good news is that the victory of the winner, Jesus Christ, is shared with all players on two conditions: One, that we know Jesus, that we have some relationship with him. And two, that we do the will of God in heaven, that we follow the rulebook. And the beautiful thing is that the better we know Jesus the more we will want to follow the rules and the more closely we follow the rules, the better we know Jesus! And in that scenario, victory is ours, yours and mine! Hallelujah!

So as we enter into a new year, as we approach this game of life for another round, let’s think about how we can improve our gameplay. How can we be better players? We need to feel the weight of the decisions we make. We need to develop a strategy for victory. How can we better know the rules of the game? How can we better follow the example of Christ? How can we stand with confidence and say, in my life I personally know Jesus and in my life I do the will of the Father?

**SLIDE 13: we read the rulebook, and we play the game together**

Well, we read the rulebook, and we play the game together. We learn together, we swap strategies together, we hold each other accountable. So in pursuit of that victory, I want to encourage you to take advantage of this rulebook…to learn it well and to live it well. That all begins with reading it. So in your bulletin we have included a Bible reading plan for this coming year. This Bible is a big book, there is a lot in there and it takes a plan to read it well. As you can see, this plan comes from an organization called the Navigators and I think it is a useful tool. If you open it up and look at month one, you will notice four readings, two from the New Testament and two from the Old. So day one has you taking a look at Matthew and Acts, Psalms and Genesis. Now also notice that each month has 25 days’ worth of readings. So built into the plan are some skip days or catch-up days if you start to fall behind. I think that’s a helpful feature. However, if you are looking at all this and it just seems like too much, they suggest on the front cover to choose two categories to read instead…so for example in month one, you could read through Matthew and Psalms and save the rest for another year.

As I said, if it’s possible, it’s better to do this reading with others. So, to help make that happen I have started up a group on Facebook, it is called “Forest Hills Church Bible -in-a-Year” Catchy right? It’s a private group but you are all invited to join and we can post some thoughts or questions about what we are reading as we go along. I myself will be reading through the Bible according to this plan and I will be posting regularly to the group. So I want to encourage you to join in this goal for the New Year, join the Facebook group, stay accountable and stay engaged!

Let’s read this book and live it together as we seek to come out victorious in this game of life! Amen.