



RESOLVES FOR THE NEW YEAR
Psalm 36:1-12; Philippians 3:13-14

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On New Year's Eve, I, like many of you, witnessed the descent of the giant apple ball in Times Square as it slowly dropped as midnight and the beginning of 2008 came in. Of course, I, like you, did that via television. One of the interesting things observed was all the excitement and commotion that was created by the people as they waited for that particular moment—the beginning of the New Year. I have often wondered why it is that we get so excited about the beginning of a new year. In many ways there was not much difference that day than from any other night that we normally have—not much except maybe in the way some folks treated that night. But why did we treat it differently? One of the reasons, of course, is we want the opportunity for a new beginning. Most of us feel like we have “goofed up” bad enough in the past, and we welcome any new opportunity to strive ahead in a different kind of way.

Philosophers have always been excited about the meaning of time and have probed deeply to see if they could understand what time really means. Some have said that it has no meaning. To them, all of life, including the present moments of time which we have, are without purpose or direction. Some, like the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, have said that the time itself in which you and I live is just a reflection of another greater world. You and I are mere projections or reflection of a greater world that we do not know at all. Philosophers have given us all kinds of interpretations. Some interesting and some not so interesting. All of us desire to know more fully what it means to us.

One of the ancient legends tells of a riddle that was asked by a monster named Sphinx as people passed by his path. If they could not answer his riddle, he would destroy them in the midst of their pilgrimage. His riddle was this: “What animal is it that in the morning walks on all fours, at noon walks on two legs, but in the evening walks on three legs?” A lot of people died before Oedipus came along and answered the riddle. “The animal,” he said, “is man.” In his infancy he crawls on all fours. When he becomes an adult at noontime of his life, he walks on two legs. When he comes to the evening of life, he walks on three legs because, then, he needs a cane to lean on to support himself.

A small girl overheard her mother musing, “Where does the time go?” “Why, it goes into everything we do,” the child responded. And so it does! Time. All kinds of interesting definitions and philosophies have been given to try to help us understand what Time is. When you look at life, some have said that life really is very short. Most of us can remember almost nothing about our childhood years before five. We can recall nothing much of our infancy unless we are hypnotized and it is brought back. For most of us, that period of time is lost to memory, at least to conscious memory. We spend, on the average, one-third of our time sleeping, some more than that, some less. We spend a good deal of our time eating, and some say that you should not count that as valuable time. I count the time spent in eating very valuable because that sometimes is where the greatest communications may take place between people. Some say you should not count the time people spend at work because a lot of people hate their jobs. If you don’t count the time of infancy and early childhood, if you don’t count the time when we are sleeping, and if you don’t count the time when we work on our jobs, boy, our lives really are short, then. But I think that we must count all of this time. What will we do with it? What have we done with it? And what will we do with whatever remainder of time we have before us?

A Lesson from the Apostle Paul

The Apostle Paul, in writing to the Philippians, gives us, what I think, is a very powerful passage that offers direction on how to live in the new year which lies before us. This particular passage we might call a kind of hinge passage, because it tells us something to do with the past and also something to do with the future. Paul reminds us that we are to forget those things which are behind us as we press on toward the goal that is ahead of us. There are at least two dimensions to his message in this passage. There are certain things which we need to forget and there are other things that we need to remember.

Learning to Forget

Forgetting really is a gift that comes to us from God. To be able to forget one’s achievements or failures and to rise up with a new sense of direction and purpose in one’s life is marvelous good news. Within a lifetime, we can bring into our life an awful lot of mental junk, spiritual refuse, which needs to be rooted out and washed from our lives. There are then some things that we need to forget as we come into this New Year.

Forget Your Resentments

The *first* I would suggest is for you and for me to learn to *forget our resentments*. It is astounding how many people poisoned their lives with secret hatreds and resentments which they have toward other people because of something they may

have said or not have said, something they may have done or not have done, or some act they did quickly, harshly or in anger. Down inside us, we now seethe with feelings of hatred and resentment toward that individual. We need to let go of these resentments because they poison our lives. They color our whole perspective on life. Our life has turned sour because we can't let go our hatreds and grudges. They have dyed our whole perspective. We need a way to cultivate the art of letting go our resentments. Let the new year provide us with an opportunity of forgiving them or seeking forgiveness and rise up as new men and women. May we forget those things which are behind us and press forward for the opportunities of newness which lie ahead of us

Forget Your Worries

Secondly I would suggest that we *forget our worries*. Now, that is not to say you should never have any concern about tomorrow. Intelligent concern and plans are necessary. We need to make preparations so that we can secure our retirement. We need to deal with our health and many other factors in life wisely and intelligently. But a lot of people have needless worry that nags at them, cripples them, and crushes them down to the ground. Jesus never said that we are not supposed to make any plans for the future or prepare for tomorrow. Jesus talked about the foolish virgins who made no preparations for the coming of the bridegroom. He also spoke about a builder taking care to prepare for his construction. So we need to take care and preparation. But needless worry about things over which we have no control only festers at us and brings about inner destruction.

I like the comment of the old, uneducated preacher who said that his favorite verse of scripture in the Bible was "It came to pass." Nothing came to stay. It all came to pass. That may not be good exegesis but it is a valid reflection on life. Whatever we have experienced, whether it is difficulties, it came to pass. Even if there are joys, they came to pass. Whatever is here is for the moment. So we learn from that experience and, then, we move on. To focus in one's life on worry is to live without a sense of the companionship of God. Constant worry as one's companionship is really a disguised kind of atheism, because it is an affirmation that we really do not believe in the providence, care, and presence of God to direct us and guide us. So, let us forget about our worries and put them in the past and focus intelligently on the tomorrows that are ahead of us.

Forget Your Privileges

We could also learn to *forget about our privileges*. There are too many people that focus their life on "what it has to offer me." What is life going to do for me? If this is our perspective, we see ourselves as privileged persons who always want everybody and everything to give us the advantage or exemption. Instead of focusing

on what life owes us we need to turn it around and see what you and I can do to care for the needs of other people. The Apostle Paul did not flaunt his Jewish past and the privileges he had known, but he put that behind him and moved on to the future before him. Is it not more Christian to be concerned with what are the needs of others than always seeking to see if I can not have my needs or my desires satisfied? The higher, more Christian way is to seek to serve. We reach out to our brother or our sister, who may have a deeper need, and seek to meet that need in a sacrificial, loving way. That indeed, I think, is more Christ-like than always desiring that I get special treatment or attention.

Forget about Failures

I would say we also need to learn to *forget about our failures*. The Apostle Paul was no stranger to failure. He felt he had failed when he started persecuting the Christians, thinking that they were against God. He saw the Christians at first as people who were going to destroy what God was seeking to do in the world. He had failed to see God at work in them. He had known failure. He had known failure even in trying to spread the message of Christ. He had been beaten, stoned, and driven out of towns. He had been rejected, imprisoned, and ridiculed, but he continued on unafraid to share the gospel message.

None of us is a stranger to failure. Each of us in his or her experience has known some kind of failure. Who has not failed a test? Who has not failed to receive some recognition or promotion? Who at some time or another has not lost an opportunity or a job or something else important? We all know something of having to live with difficulties and failures. But as Christians we do not let these crush us down. We seek to put those behind us and move toward what tomorrow will give us. One of the sad things is that so many people focus their lives only on their difficulties, failures and lost opportunities and not on the newness of life which lies before them, and what they can be, do, and become.

Sören Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher, tells a story about a man who bought some champion horses from the king's coachman. He bought these beautiful stallions wanting to have them as his own horses to show them off and to use with his carriage. He fed them and took care of them, but over a short period of time he noticed that the horses began to lose their great sense of showmanship which once they had had. Their champion appearance soon began to leave them. They began to get thin and did not eat properly. He couldn't understand it, so he called in the king's coachman; the coachman worked with the animals for one month. Then one could see the horses' heads held high and proud once again. Their coats gleamed, their weight was right and they moved with the proper gait. The man asked: "What did you do?" The coachman responded: "I brought the horses up to my expectations and not up to their own expectations."

Too many of us let our failures and defeats give us our perspective on life and that dominates our expectation. God is seeking to call us to be more than we have ever become and to realize the greater possibility of what you and I can be and do as His children in His kingdom.

Forget Your Victories

I think we also need to learn to *forget our victories and our achievements*. Sometimes we assess our worth too much on our achievements. We measure our life by whether or not we are listed in *Who's Who* or whether we have a trophy chest filled, or a scrapbook filled with all kinds of recognitions, or whether we are listed in the Dunn and Bradstreet ratings. Sometimes we focus too much on thinking that we have arrived and we look too much on our own achievements and forget the power, grace, and ministry of God and what we are because of his grace, love and power. Too often we embrace our achievements as though they were all by our own doing alone.

Paul reminds us in this passage that for Christ's sake he counted all of his former gains as loss. He counted all of them as "garbage." The figure of "refuse" was the food which the scavenger dogs feed upon. In looking at his Jewish, religious prestige, Paul said, even as a Pharisee who kept all of the law and had triumphed greatly with achievements, he saw all of that as insignificant compared to the grace and love of God. "For Christ's sake, I have learned to count my former gains as loss." The tragedy is that sometimes we allow our achievements, or position in society to get in the way of our being a greater minister and serving more effectively for Christ. Wherever you are on the scale of life, do not see success as something merely to be enjoyed, but see your achievements as an opportunity for greater ministry to people. Forget where you are and be open to what God can call you to be. May we not lean on our strength but on the power of God.

Some Things to Remember

There are some things that we need to forget. Let's put these behind us. But there are also some things that we need to remember. Paul said, "Forgetting those things which are behind us, press toward the mark for the prize for the high calling of God." What are some of those things that we ought to try to remember?

Remember Your Paradoxical Nature

One thing we need to remember is the *paradoxical nature that we have*. We all have to confess that sometimes we do good and sometimes we do evil. It astounds me how much evil I often find within my own life. I have spent decades studying the scriptures, living with holy things and being a pastor of churches. When some act is done by a terrorist group, I notice the hostility, anger, and hard feelings which it

brings up in me. I realize how far from being Christian I really am. I am a long way from living the kind of life that God is calling me to be. Each of us is sinful.

The Psalmist talks about sinfulness. In the passage we read today, the psalmist speaks about the man who is deliberately rebelling against God. It is the oracle of a rebel. He plots in his bed to do evil, and he is always trying to see what he can plan to carry out his evil intention. He is unconcerned about the needs of other people. This evil person has heard of God, knows him, but has deliberately broken the covenant and moved away from God and his ways. Sometimes we discuss philosophically in Sunday School classes and other places, who are those who are the furthest away from God's grace. Are they the lost heathen in Africa who have never heard any word of God? If you read the scriptures carefully, you will discern that the people who are most out of God's favor are those who have heard his love, who have been a part of the covenant, and, then have moved away from it. They have rebelled and have said that God's love is of no significance. These persons have known God's love, have heard it, and yet they turn away from it. That indeed is one of the great tragedies -- to know God's love and not to live by it. Sometimes we are sinners by rebellion, and we deliberately take that avenue. Sometimes we are sinners simply because we have taken a wrong path, and we may not know at that particular moment that it is the path that leads to destruction, or difficulty. But we go that way anyway.

I recall as a young boy, and I'm sure that none of you when you were young did things like this, but we used to turn a street sign around so that it would not mark the proper street. When somebody came that way, instead of saying Lakewood Street, which was where I lived, it would say Thomas Road and people would go the wrong direction because of that change. Now, that is a part of the mischievousness which boys would sometimes engage in. If a driver came that way and wanted to go on a certain street, he might take the wrong road because we had turned the sign that way. His mistake might not be his own fault. He might be on the wrong road and could go a long ways out of his way. But, if he never finds he is on the wrong road, then that's his fault, is it not? Each of us may get on the wrong road for a moment or two. We may travel down the street for a ways, but surely after we have gone some direction, we can soon sense that this is not the right road. We should quickly realize that this is not the road I should travel on because this is a way that leads me to a dead end street, destruction, and sinfulness.

One of the saddest things about the Church that sometimes is passed around is that the Church is made up of those who are just the "goody-goodies" of society. All of us are sinners. None of you is a "goody-goody," I hate to tell you. You are a sinner, just as much as I am a sinner. We may be sinners saved by the grace of God, but you can't fool me or your wife or husband or parents or children that you are not a sinner. They know full well that you and I are. And so does each of us deep down inside. The

Church does not say that we have no sin, but we are sinners who come to experience the grace and forgiveness of God. We reach over to invite others who are sinners to come in to share and experience the great forgiving grace of God which leads to the abundant life. We need to remember that in the beginning of this new year, we are still sinners. We still need the forgiving grace of God. We still need opportunities to begin again and again.

Remember Some Difficult Times

I hope also that in this New Year you and I will *remember some of the difficult times* we have experienced in the past. Don't just forget them. Remember them. If we do not remember them, then we shall never learn any lessons from them. If you and I have gone through difficult times, then don't just focus on the difficulty times, but see what there was in this experience or difficulty that can enable you and me to live more creatively now. Learn from the difficulty. Learn how to be a better person because of it. The experience may teach us how to act better toward others. We should learn how to avoid the same kind of problems or similar problems in the future. A minister friend of mine who lost his wife said that, through that dark, deep tragedy, one of the great lessons that he has learned is that he will never go to the home of a grieving person again without a deeper sense of compassion and understanding. He really knows what grief is now. As we remember our difficulties from the past, hopefully, they will enable us to be better persons because of the lessons we have learned from them. Remember them and learn from them.

Remember the Available Strength

Thirdly, *remember also the available strength which each of us has*. We do not face difficulties, burdens, or problems alone. Paul tells us in this passage about the power and presence of God which is available to us as we move toward the high calling of God. The Psalmist tells us about the refuge which is found in the shadow of the wings of God. He speaks about the wings that under gird us and uphold us. Remember the available strength that comes to you from God in times of temptations, or when life is filled with burdens and problems. None of us faces them isolated or alone or in our own resources or our own strength. There is the power and presence of God to sustain us and under gird us.

A young man had given in to a temptation in his business and a friend was talking to him and asking him why he had done it. And he said, "You will just never understand the external pressures that were put on me." And his friend turned to him and asked, "Man, where were your inner braces?" You and I, when we face the problems and difficulties of life, need to sense the inner braces that come to us with the strength, power, and presence of God to sustain us.

Remember to Be Tolerant

I hope also in this New Year that you and I will *remember to be more_tolerant*. Paul tells us that he has not yet arrived. "I am still enroute. I am pressing toward the mark." I have not yet arrived. I am like the athlete who is running to cross the finish line. I am still running, still engaged in following Christ. One of the saddest things in life is for any person, especially for a Christian, to hold himself or herself up as though he or she has some superior intellectual grasp of Christianity, and everybody else is seen as inferior. They say in essence, "I am the more mature Christian than you." This attitude makes us intolerant of others in their understanding of Christ and in their Christian pilgrimage. We use only our understanding to measure what it means to be like Christ.

Frederick Sontag wrote a book a couple of years ago entitled *The Crises of Faith*. A devastating book review was written about his book in *The Christian Century*. Dr. Sontag wrote a letter to the editor of *The Christian Century* and said in essence this: "I did not expect everybody to agree with what I said in my book. But I guess I was really dumbfounded by the vicious attack that my fellow Christian made upon me personally. He treated me as though I were not a member of the faith. Why could he not examine my book and, even if he disagreed, see that we were fellow soldiers fighting on the same side in the war?" "We regard a brother," he noted sadly, "as if he were a savage enemy and treat him accordingly because we think that his doctrine and behavior constitute a perversion of faith."

I do not understand that kind of approach for a brother or a sister in the faith either. I remember a teacher I had in school who would accept no answer except the answer he wanted. Unless you believe as he believed, your belief was not acceptable. He rejected every other approach but his approach. We need to be more tolerant of others and understand that our theological view is not the only view that one can have to understand what is the essence of the Christian faith. In our religious knowledge, we are all infants and mere children enroute seeking to become more like God. I hope we shall remember that.

Remember to Persevere

Then lastly, as Paul says in our Scripture text, we have to keep on. We are *called to persevere*. Don't quit or give up. Sometimes when we remember certain things and forget other things we are not sure which way to go because the struggle is often hard.

Many of you like I did probably stayed up recently and watched several football games. As you know, some of the games went into double overtime. All of the players continued to do their very best as long as they could. Of course a team finally lost, but each team had persevered and given their best. That's all that any of us can do in life. We are called to offer our best as long as we can.

I don't know if you enjoyed reading the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes by Bill Watterson or not, but I did. Maybe you saw this one several years ago. Calvin is walking along talking to his toy tiger. "I am getting disillusioned with these new years," Calvin says. "They don't seem very new at all! Each New Year is just like the old year. Here another year has gone by and everything's still the same! There is still pollution and war and stupidity and greed! Things haven't changed! I say, 'What kind of future is this?!' I thought things were supposed to improve! I thought the future was supposed to be better!" As they walk along through the snow Hobbes observes, "The problem with the future is that it keeps turning into the present."

And our future will! So we have to learn to know how to live in the present. I hear people say all the time, "Well, I don't make any resolutions or I don't know how to make any." So this morning I want to help you reflect on some resolves for the New Year. The following are some things I have thought about for myself and for some other folks I know. *Think about these.*

Resolve to forget grudges, hatred, resentments, failures, achievements, hurts, misunderstandings, sins which have been forgiven, past mistakes, wrongs, criticisms, sharp words, caustic language, curses and degrading gestures. Forget those.

Resolve to remember to be kind, to encourage others; apologize when you are wrong or when it will just help. Visit the sick, be faithful in worship and in the financial support of your church. Pray and meditate more regularly, discipline your body, mind, spirit, manner, tongue, and temper. Praise others and not yourself; smile and laugh more. Find time to help, to listen, and to assist others. Telephone or write someone you have not seen in a long time. Let them know you are thinking about them. Spend some time alone, walk, meditate, sit, pray, reflect, think, be still and quiet. Get more sleep and rest, and also exercise more. Turn off the TV and talk or read a book. Relax and play more.

Be more optimistic, grateful and expressive. Correct a bad habit, set new goals, start a new hobby. Work in Sunday School, serve on a church committee, be more faithful in your church support, help in preschool, be a children or youth teacher, or help in other places where you are needed. Share the good news of Christ with a friend. Invite somebody to church. Tell your wife or husband, children or parents that you love them more often; hug them more; be more understanding and caring. Resolve to love God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself. Strive to seek first the kingdom of God.

You don't have any resolves that you can make for the New Year? I have suggested a few I know I can use, and I know that some of you can resolve to live differently, too.

O God, we thank you for this New Year and the gift it gives to us to begin again. May

we spend the gift of this time wisely as we invest our life and energy in it. Through Christ, who has redeemed us in our time, we pray. Amen. ■

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, on this first Sunday of the New Year, we pause to ask for a sense of direction from your hand in our own personal living, in our life as a congregation, in our nation, and in the world. We pray, O Lord, that your Spirit will work within the hearts of all persons to bring about peace.

We commit now this present time in worship to you. We come to fortify ourselves and to be strengthened to serve you more effectively. We give to you all of the anxieties we have about the future and our uncertainties about the roads of life ahead of us. Our faith has been built on the confidence and assurance of your presence with us in the past. We turn now and look toward the future. As a child trusts its parents, as the birds trust the air, the animals their instincts, so we lean in trust upon you and your grace. Give us the assurance that your strong arm will bear us up no matter what our difficulty is. We trust you whether our burden is grief or a family member who is ill or a family member who is across the seas, or we are crushed by a load of depression. May we have a strong sense of your presence to lift us up.

On this first Sunday of the New Year, we open our spirits to your Spirit so we might be led by your hand, feel the strength of your grace and love, and the breath of your presence within us. Lord, we wait now in confidence for your guidance in all that we think and do. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our living Lord. Amen.