

Resolutions that Really Matter

We have just turned the corner on another year. Millions of North Americans have seen another year recede into history. For some it was a year of advancement and progress; for others it was a year of regress in which goals slipped away unreached. For too many individuals the Advent Season was a disaster! Not only did they miss the meaning of the season, ignoring Christ, but they overindulged in their eating and drinking and spending, running up burdensome debts. Once again, the New Year will commence with the usual list of good intentions and resolutions. You may be interested to hear what the top ten New Year's resolutions are for 2008 that Americans have made:

1. Spend more time with family & friends.
2. Work on physical fitness.
3. Tame the bulge.
4. Quit smoking.
5. Enjoy life more.
6. Quit drinking
7. Get out of debt
8. Learn something new
9. Help others
10. Get organized

Of course, numerous individuals have simply resolved not to bother making any resolutions at all. One person wryly quipped that after several years of fully achieving his New Year's resolutions, all that remained was for him to maintain his current level of perfection. We should all be so successful!

Others have made a veritable industry out of New Year's resolutions, providing such handy guides as:

- Complete Idiot's Guide to Weight Loss
- Complete Idiot's Guide to Improving Your IQ
- Stop Whining and Start Winning
- De Junk Your Mind
- The Lazy Person's Handbook
- Complete Idiot's Guide to Improving your Memory (I keep forgetting to read this one!)

Perhaps the reason that so many people continue to make resolutions at the turn of the year – and that others profit from this activity - is that there is a desire to make a new start, to become a new person, to gain a measure of control over their own destiny, which often seems so elusive, so hidden.

This first Sunday in the year we are reminded that we live in both time and space. In fact, the very name of this month, January, is significant. January is named after the Roman god Janus, who was pictured as a man with two faces, one looking backward and the other forward, as if pondering the past while anticipating the future. It is good that we do this.

In moving through space we look ahead. The driver of a car or a plane sits at the front and peers before him. But in moving through time we cannot see ahead. Apart from the occasional flash of foresight, we search for tomorrow like one who drives into a thick fog. In fact, we move into our tomorrows more like persons rowing a boat - with our backs to the bow! We are forced to chart our course by the landmarks behind us in time. We steer by the wake of our boat, occasionally turning in an effort to discern what lies ahead. But always the future is shrouded in fog. Paul said it well: "We see through a glass, darkly!" (KJV).

This morning, as we peer into the fog of the future, I am grateful that God has positioned certain beacons of hope as well as certain directional beacons to guide us.

Beacons of Hope

The first beacon of hope I would point out is found in Jeremiah 29:11 where God assures us: "*I know the plans I have for you ... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*" Our God has not left the future at the mercy of mysterious forces of chaos and randomness. Neither has he given it over to the dark powers and principalities ruled by Satan. God is sovereign! God is good! What he has planned is good, and what he has planned he will surely accomplish.

This promise was given to Israel when she had ceased to be a sovereign nation. She was homeless, leaderless, without national identity, seemingly without a future, and without hope. But the Lord had his plans; plans that we read about in books like Nehemiah, Ezra, Haggai, and Zechariah. It is thrilling for students of the Word and of history to be able to look back and see how God's plans for his people, although often shrouded in mystery and hidden from their view, have come to fruition – and still are. No prophecy of the Lord has ever failed. The Lord faithfully brought Israel back from captivity in Babylon. They rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and built a new temple. It is true that since then, because of unbelief, they have been scattered for many centuries, but in 1948 the Lord brought Jews from all over the world together to form the modern nation-state of Israel. Today she stands at the centre of global politics and will occupy centre stage in the events leading to the return of our Lord.

Today, based on everything we read in both the Old and New Testaments, we can put our faith, trust, and full confidence in the One who has plans for us, plans to give us hope and a future! As the Church, as the Body of Christ, we too are His people.

Another beacon of hope I would point out is this promise found in 1 John 3:2-3: "*Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.*"

Think about the significance of such a promise. Here we are, caught up in the human drama, an unfolding drama filled with all the stuff of any good drama – suspense, danger, intrigue, risk, reward, adversaries to be overcome, towering heights to be ascended, bewildering depths yawning like great caverns threatening to swallow us – it's all there. In the very midst of the drama, however, a beacon of hope appears in the fog-bound seas of life. It informs us that the goal of the human story, the climax of the great adventure, is that we are to be conformed to Christ.

Be encouraged! Embrace the future with a sense of hope, joy, anticipation, and excitement. In the midst of the drama, with its bewildering twists and turns, God has made it possible for us to live with ourselves, so that we will be neither bored with ourselves nor ashamed of ourselves. With God in control of our lives we can make the transition from Advent to adventure! And it is the greatest adventure of all, for it takes us on an unparalleled journey from who we are today to who we are destined to become tomorrow.

Our God is committed to this goal. Paul wrote to the Philippians, *“Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus”* (1:6). The Paul added, *“For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose”* (2:13). What a thrill and what an assurance it is to know that it is God Himself who is not only committed to our transformation but who is actually at work in us to bring it to fruition.

The writer of Hebrews states that Jesus is the *“author and perfecter of our faith”* (12:2). Peter adds that:

“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Peter 1:3-4).

These are great statements, worthy of full acceptance. But they do not mean that there is no role for us to play, as if God will do all the work. We are called to be faithful disciples. When Cortez disembarked his 500 conquistadors upon the east coast of Mexico, he set fire to the ships. His warriors, watching their means of retreat burning in the harbour, knew that they were committed with their lives to the conquest of the new world for Spain. All doubt had been cauterized from their minds.

Just so, anyone who first sets foot on the shore of discipleship is called to burn his ships in the harbour. Jesus said, *“No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God”* (Luke 9:62).

Beacons of Direction

With this as our attitude, then, what beacons of direction do we find? What guidance is given as we endeavour to set worthy goals and make resolutions that really matter? They are so numerous, so prolific, that all I can this morning is summarize them into a few points.

Pursue Godliness

The first beacon of direction instructs us to pursue godliness. Since Peter says that we have been given everything we need for life and godliness, then it follows that we should pursue godliness. And sure enough, just a few verses along in 2 Peter 1:7, Peter lists godliness as one of the essential attributes that should be on the increase in the life of the disciple. Godliness, along with the other Christian character traits mentioned by Peter, will keep us from being ineffective and unproductive, it will keep us from falling, and it will ensure that we receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Paul told Timothy, “*Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come*” (1 Tim. 4:7-8).

Let this be the year in which we resolve to pursue godliness as a congregation – as individuals, but also as a congregation. The Lord has commanded us to be holy, and it is hard for me to conceive of a New Year’s resolution that matters more than this.

Pursue the Knowledge of God and His Ways

The second beacon of direction I would point out instructs us to pursue knowledge. This is not the call for us to embark on a head trip. Rather, it is the invitation for us to fully know the Lord and His ways. In Jeremiah 9:24 we read, “But let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me.”

Jesus said, “If you hold to my teachings, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32).

In earlier times the Lord spoke through the prophet Hosea concerning the condition of His people. They were stumbling day and night (4:5) so badly that the Lord lamented, “*My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge*” (4:6). How my heart laments that many in our own culture today who are interested in so-called “spiritual things” are being destroyed from a lack of knowledge. They have been drawn into New Age philosophies or various cults, or they have grown cold and fallen away from the Faith because their knowledge of the Lord and His ways was superficial and shallow.

My fervent hope for our church this year is that we will be a congregation deep into the Word of God, studying it together, exhorting each other in its deepest truths, helping one another to actually flesh the Word out in our daily lives, building one another up in the Faith. Let this be the year in which we all pull together to really know the Lord and His ways.

To pursue godliness and to pursue the knowledge of God and His ways through the study and application of His Word, these are the kinds of resolutions that really matter.

Here we are, then, in January. It is the optimum time for us all to ponder the past as we anticipate the future. Who have we been? Who are we becoming? Now is the time to reflect deeply on such questions and to take appropriate action. We must not wait until it is too late. Someone has well said:

Of all our persecutors the most haunting is the spectre of the person we might have been!

Let us not wait until all we can do is look back with regret. Let us remember that ...

With God in control of our lives we can make the transition from Advent to adventure, all the way to Christ-likeness!