



Should Have, Could Have, Would Have January 5, 2019

Happy New Year, everyone. I trust you all had a nice holiday this week... drank some champagne and watched the ball drop on Tuesday, ate some pork and sauerkraut on Wednesday, all that jazz. Stop me if you've heard these:

"I love it when they drop the ball in Times Square, it's a nice reminder of how I've been dropping the ball all year long." "My friend asked me where I see myself in the new year. I said, how would I know? I don't have 2020 vision." "My New Year's resolution was to read more, so I put the subtitles on my TV." "My New Year's resolution is to be more optimistic by keeping my cup half-full... I just have to choose what to put in the cup, Scotch or Bourbon." "I was going to quit all my bad habits for the new year, but then I remembered that nobody likes a quitter." "The year 2020 is going to be filled with so many puns about perfect vision... I can't wait to see them all." "At the beginning of this year I made a New Year's resolution to lose 10 pounds... Only 15 more to go!" "What happened to the man who shoplifted a calendar on New Year's Eve? He got 12 months!"

... okay, that's enough of that.

If you're like most, of course, New Year's means new resolutions. New beginnings, new opportunities, fresh starts. At least, that's what it *should* be about, anyway. Unfortunately, in our broken, fallen and imperfect lives, what that ends up meaning for most is that we are painfully reminded of the resolutions not kept from last year. Those post-holiday-blues I talked about last week continue to mess with our minds. That wintertime depression continues to be a force in our lives. We should be looking ahead with optimism at another year, another chance to get it right, another clean slate opportunity to improve our lives, to be happier, to get more things done, to accomplish something meaningful and purposeful that brings fulfillment to our existence, and to simply enjoy the fruits of living God's creation.

But life is full of should haves, would haves, and could haves. The bottom line is, it's hard for many of us to focus on the what-could-be's, rather than dwelling on the what-weren'ts. What resolutions did I *fail* to keep this last year? What *didn't* I get accomplished? What failures do I have to mark the year? Oh my god, what am I doing with my life...

This is sad, but it's understandable. It's our human nature to fixate only on the failures and regrets, rather than shift our attention to all the good that we did – or, the evils that we *didn't* indulge. Many of us are just naturally oriented to being glass-half-empty type people, it's just kinda who we are. And again, not to beat the dead horse, but once those post-holiday-blues

kick in, this effect goes into overdrive. Once the New Year's parties are over, and we all start to sober up and take stock of the last year (because the season tells us we should be doing that, whether we want to or not)... well, you're not alone if you don't like what you see. A lot of other folks are in the same boat. Including a lot of people in our lives that do an excellent job of hiding it, putting on a fake smile every day, and pretending everything is ok when in reality, they're as insecure and full of regret as we are.

At least we're in good company. The great figures of scripture, generally, were no better. Consider the cast of misfits who play critical roles in the Bible: Childless Abraham, who went on to father the nation of Israel and by extension, the Messiah; Joseph, the least of his brothers, who rose above a life of slavery to become Pharaoh's right hand man; Moses, a shy man with a fear of public speaking, who went on to lead his entire race out of Egypt; David, the youngest and most diminutive of his brothers, who went on to become King of Israel and ancestor of the Messiah; Numerous prophets, culminating in John the Baptist, who lived in poverty, as dirty beggars their entire lives, but were chosen by God to be God's unique messengers to all Creation; Saint Peter, a humble fisherman with no formal education, who went on to found the Church on the charisma of his preaching; and Saint Paul, the first great theologian of the Church and author of most of the New Testament, who once was a murderer of Christians and a persecutor of the Church, and who wrote these words:

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

At this time of year, sisters and brothers, as we beat ourselves up for the resolutions not kept, for the year we may feel we have squandered, let us remember: All of these figures and many, many more, throughout the history of God's plan of salvation, were acquainted with failure. They knew regret. They knew frustration. They knew what it was like to be lost and adrift in life, feeling (correctly or otherwise) that their lives were meaningless, purposeless, unfulfilled, with a sense that their days on earth were a wasted effort, and a lost cause.

They also, eventually, came to know and realize the wondrous ways in which God was using them, to accomplish things more amazing than they ever hoped or dreamed possible.

Our Gospel lesson for today comes to us from St. John's version of the "Christmas story." We are, technically, still in the Christmas liturgical season, after all. Whereas Matthew and Luke start with infancy narratives about Baby Jesus and the Holy Family and the various adventures surrounding Jesus' birth – and Mark completely omits an infancy narrative of any kind, choosing instead to start with Jesus' adult ministry – John goes a little further back... as in, back to the beginning of all Creation. His Gospel kicks off with, "In the beginning..." just as does the book of Genesis. Can't really get any further back than that. This is where, for John, Jesus' story truly begins.

John's Gospel, as you know, was the latest and last of the Gospels to be written, probably not completed until very late in the first, or possibly early in the second, century. By this time, the Christian Church had had plenty of time to contemplate the mystery of Jesus' divinity, and John's Gospel reflects a higher Christology than does any of the other Gospels. By the time John writes, Jesus had made the full transition in Christian mainstream belief from, "Son of God," to, "God the Son."

So as far as John is concerned, the "Christmas story" really begins with Jesus as fully God, speaking Creation into being at the beginning of all things. This passage from the first chapter of the Gospel is the seminal defense of Jesus' full equality with God, as it explicitly states in no uncertain terms that all things in the world, which have been created, were created through Jesus – this logically precludes the possibility that Jesus himself could have been a created being, and therefore is eternal as God the Father is eternal.

All this theology may be somewhat interesting, but we may sit and wonder what any of this has to do with us, especially as I speak to you about New Year's, about our resolutions not kept, about our frustrations and disappointments with the year that was, et cetera.

Well, here's the reason we retell the Creation story: it reminds us that God's spoken word is "living and active", that it accomplishes that which it seeks to accomplish. When God speaks, stuff happens. God's resolutions *always* come to pass. The word "resolution", itself, is the noun form of the verb "resolve", right? Well, when our weak, imperfect, fallen, fallible, and broken resolve, fails to accomplish that which it sets out to do, God's resolve *always* comes through. The same God that speaks Creation into being from nothingness, makes things happen when God speaks in our lives, now.

And what does God have to say in today's Gospel? "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become *children of God*, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." *Children of God!* Just as Jesus taught us, we may call God "Abba", which literally translates as, "Daddy". Jesus tells us elsewhere in John's Gospel, "The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever." Let's clean up that language to be gender-inclusive and say, "The child has a

place there, forever.” We are not merely God’s *followers*. We are God’s *children*. Members of the household *forever!* And because God said so, and what God speaks comes to pass, because God’s word is living and active, it is so, and it can *never be undone*.

We have a place in the household for eternity! God’s resolution is that *nothing* will separate us from God’s love. That we will be welcomed in the Kingdom *forever*. Our reservations for the Kingdom, are non-refundable. And unlike our weak resolve, unlike the ways in which we can fail, God’s resolutions do not fail.

What else does God say? Again, elsewhere in John’s Gospel, Jesus tells us: “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.” Greater works than these! Greater works than raising the dead! Giving sight to the blind! Healing the lepers! Feeding the thousands! We will do *greater works than these*, and we can’t argue or deny this, because Jesus said it! And what God resolves, comes to pass. St. Paul says in Philippians that we can do *all things* through the One who gives us strength. So when our weak and fallen human resolve fails us, God’s resolve picks us right up and gets us back into the fight of life – because, just as a certain hymn which this congregation is very fond of, says: “God himself fights by our side.”

Sisters and brothers – I hope you do not find yourselves falling prey to that tendency, in this season, to beat yourselves up over the year that wasn’t, over the chances not taken, over the opportunities we *think* we squandered. You never know how those things may have worked out. For all we know, we avoided failure and tragedy that could have awaited us on the paths not taken.

Life is far too short for regrets, my friends. At the end of the day, you did what you did. We can change nothing about what we chose yesterday. We can only control what we will choose tomorrow. And when we’re feeling low, when we’re tempted to feel like we are a failure, all we need remind ourselves, is that the God of the Universe, the One who speaks Creation into Being from nothingness, has adopted us as children of the Kingdom, and enables us to do all things. When our weak resolve fails us, all we need do, is borrow a cup of God’s resolve.

Amen.