

The Past and the Promise

Ephesians 1:3-14

CWZepp, BWCOB, January 3, 2010

We all do things that – looking back – we probably would have done differently if given the chance. Put simply, we all have regrets. Some are fairly insignificant in the larger scheme of things. For instance, I regret that when I was a young lad, I went through a phase when I considered it the height of fashion to fold my pant legs over and tightly roll them halfway up my calves. Likewise, I also regret that during my college years I went through a beret wearing phase. You may not be surprised to discover that I have many such regrets when it comes to the way I have dressed myself over the years. Today may add another to my list of personal appearance regrets.

But other regrets are more enduring and always conjure a twinge of personal bitterness. Case in point – I will always regret that I never had the opportunity to play organized sports as a youth. And I regret that I spent nearly two full years of my college life trying to make an unhealthy relationship work.

But these things are in the past. What is done is done. There is nothing I can do to go back and fix these things. There is nothing I can do to erase these regrets. The best I can hope for is the grace to accept these things I cannot change.

However, there are still other regrets that may or may not reach far into the past, but that we feel some power and some responsibility to do something about. These are the regrets that New Year's resolutions are made of. You know the variety...I regret that I have eaten poorly and not exercised regularly in recent years, and so I resolve in the New Year to lose weight by eating right and exercising. I regret that I have let my work take priority over my family, so I resolve in the New Year to spend more time with the wife and kids. I regret that I don't have a savings account to fall back on in tough times, so I resolve to start one in the New Year.

The list and the variations could go on and on. And they do. Every year, with the turning of the clock and the beginning of a new calendar year, people across the country and at least the western world take the opportunity afforded by the New Year to make some resolution for change. Now perhaps you are one of the lucky few who have found a New Year's resolution to be a platform for a positive life change. If that is you, I extend my congratulations. And I must confess that I am a bit jealous. Because in my experience, New Year's resolutions have been a consistent source of failure. Rather than helping me make positive changes in my life, they have more often than not simply added to my list of regrets. From what I perceive, I am not alone.

Why is it then, that so many of us keep making these resolutions, only to keep faltering in their endurance? Is it that we lack discipline? Do we lack the will power to follow through? Do we fail to plan ahead adequately, so that we sabotage our own potential for success?

It is fairly easy to see why New Year's Resolutions have ongoing appeal, even for those of us who have failed at keeping past resolutions. We have already named the reason – we all have regrets – things we would do differently if given the chance. And for those regrets that are ongoing – those which we know we have some power to change for the better – the New Year affords a regular opportunity to take the plunge and make that change.

It is by no means the only or even the best opportunity that we have for making such changes. Life presents us with many opportunities: a new semester leads a student to be more conscientious in their studies, a new relationship leads one to face their drinking problem, a heart attack serves as a wake up call to a healthier lifestyle, a new baby in the family inspires one to finally kick the smoking habit. Such times and events provide that extra little bit of motivation that it takes to move us from “someday I'd like to” or “one of these days I am going to stop” to “today is the day – the right time is now.”

Its not just an individual thing either. Groups of all stripes are similarly motivated. Back in August, every NFL team was potentially playoff bound. Today, I am forced to admit that after this afternoon's game, the Redskins will not be playing again this season. But next season...well, it's a whole new season. And I will be high on hope that a new season will be better than this one has been.

A year ago, many in our nation were eagerly anticipating the inauguration of a new President, high on hope that he would deliver on his promise to bring change to Washington. Now many have found their hope fading as the realities of American political life have reared their ugly heads. But in another three years, folks around the country will pin their hopes for our country on another election, hoping that another four years or a different leader will yield a hoped for future.

Today our congregation eagerly awaits the calling of new pastoral leadership, and many of our hopes are likewise pinned on this time of new beginning. We hope that a downward attendance trend will be reversed. That budget deficits and decreased giving will turn to abundance and increased outreach. That our sense of mission will be clarified and our commitment to living out our faith will be strengthened.

Such times of looking forward to new beginnings are, generally speaking, natural and good. Whether it be an individual with a New Year's resolution to lose weight or a country hoping a new President can lead them beyond partisan politics, a new father resolving to stop drinking or a congregation looking for a new pastor to bring new vision and life among them – these times of new beginnings provide an opportunity to see into a hoped for future, and to take the first steps toward realizing that future. They can be spring boards to transformation, doorways to a better tomorrow. Indeed, the language and the spirit of our New Year's observances and of other times of new beginnings can easily sound very much like gospel – Good News for those yearning for a fresh start, longing to put the past behind them.

But so often the Good News turns to bad news, and the hoped for better days turn to bitter days of disappointment. The hopes fade, resolve softens, reality sinks in, and nothing much changes.

Why?

Surely there is more than one reason. But today, I want to think about just one. When we make New Year's resolutions or look to any time or event as a new beginning, we often do *not* actually want change. Rather we want *exchange*. We want to turn in our old life and pick up a new one. We want to dispose of last year's self with last year's calendars. We don't want just a new beginning, we want a completely new life story. A new story with a new past. A past that isn't filled with pain and regrets. A past that doesn't need a new beginning. A past that isn't ours.

Fortunately, this is not message of the gospel. For since the days of Noah when God regretted the creation of humankind, and tried to erase the mistake and start over, God has modeled a different way. Since that time, God has not tried for a clean slate, or tried to bring about the kingdom by erasing the past. Instead, God has worked to redeem our past. And in the hands of God, all things work for good, even our regrets. Consider King David. Do you think he had some regrets? Say after committing adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband killed when he found out she was pregnant? And that is only one of the regrets we know about after three millennia. But get this: in the opening verses of the New Testament, in the first few lines of Matthew's good news gospel, we read that the child born of David's regret became an essential link in the genealogy of Jesus.

For those of us in Christ, the Good News is not that our past has been erased or forgotten, but rather that it has been redeemed. The Christmas story that we have been celebrating in recent weeks is the incarnation – the embodiment – of this good news. For God did not say “out with old and in with the new.” But God did say “I make all things new.” To that end, the word became flesh and dwelt among us. God story became irrevocably intertwined with our story. Our past became God's past – regrets and all. And in Christ, as our scripture for this morning reminds us, we have redemption according to the riches of his grace. But that is not all. In Christ, we also become heirs of the promise – that we might live to the praise of his glory, and live into God's plan to gather up all things in heaven and earth in Christ. In other words, not only did our past become God's past, but God's future became our future. This is the promise of redemption.

So in this new year, may our resolution be to simply to live into this promise, to claim our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of Christ's glory. For when we have heard the word of truth, the good news of our salvation, and have believed in him, we are marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit – the Spirit who makes all things new.