

FOR THE PRAISE of God's Glory

Sermon, January 2, 2011

Texts: John 1:10-18; Ephesians 1:3-14

Welcome on this first Sunday of a New Year. It may be that some of you here have made resolutions; perhaps one of your resolutions for 2011 is to be in worship every week. Good for you! That's one resolution you've kept for at least one week. I won't ask you if you've resolved to lose the weight you gained between Thanksgiving and Christmas; as someone once put it, people are so worried about what they eat between Thanksgiving and Christmas, but we really should be worried about what we eat between Christmas and *[the next]* Thanksgiving! The late Erma Bombeck once listed four of her resolutions for the New Year: "1. I will go to no doctor whose office plants have died. 2. I'm going to follow my husband's suggestion to put a little excitement into my life by living within our budget. 3. I'm going to apply for a hardship scholarship to Weight Watchers. 4. *(and I think this is my favorite)* I will never loan my car to anyone I have given birth to."

Ed McManus writes: "Don't worry about keeping those News Year's resolutions. You only have to deal with them until February and then you can give them up for Lent" *(except this year, of course, Lent doesn't begin until March 9!)*. Another wag put it, "A New Year's resolution is something that goes in one year and out the other."

Why do we bother to make New Year's resolutions in the first place? Why do we feel this need each January 1 to set new goals? Well, one reason is that resolutions help us to identify our priorities. Resolutions are an attempt to address the question: How do I want to invest my time, energy, money, and talents in this New Year? New Year's Day is an annual reminder to us that time is passing; and it seems each New Year's Day comes up faster and faster with each passing year. The holiday serves as a reminder it is up to each of us to maximize the potential of all the moments we have while we have them. Resolutions are a good thing, especially if there are changes we need to make in our lives. I heard about one poor guy who telephoned his girlfriend and got the following recording: "I am not available right now, but thank you for caring enough to call. I am making some changes in my life. Please leave a message after the beep. If I do not return your call, you are one of the changes."

According to research conducted by the **New York Times**, the Top Ten Resolutions made by people nationwide include some variation of the following: "1. Stop Smoking. 2. Get Fit. 3. Lose Weight. 4. Enjoy Life More. 5. Quit Drinking. 6. Get organized. 7. Learn Something Totally New. 8. Get Out of Debt. 9. Spend More Time With Family." And number 10: "Help People More."

Again, we make resolutions to help us prioritize our lives, and to make the most out of the fleeting moments we have in each passing year. I believe another reason we make resolutions is that we are made in the image of a resolute God who also makes (and keeps!) resolutions. From Genesis to Revelation, the entire Bible is a witness to God's overall resolution, God's determination, to be *for* us, not against us. If you've learned nothing else from church and/or the Scriptures, know this: God is not out to get you! God wants to do us all *good*. He wants us to experience the fullness of life He has to offer. From cover to cover the Bible is about God's resolution to redeem us AND to turn us into a people who will become His co-workers, agents of His redeeming, reconciling, restoring love in this world. As our New Testament readings assert, God's resolution toward humanity took place long before anything in creation came to be. Even before the beginning of time, God resolved two things:

One, He resolved to fashion creation in a marvelous and complex way, by the Word of His mouth. We don't even get past the first three verses of the Bible before God speaks the first words, constructive, creative words of power, bringing light into the darkness. "*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth the earth was void and without form and darkness covered over the surface of the deep, the spirit of God moved across the waters, and God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light.*" I've made this point before, but please note this: God didn't use His words to curse the darkness that was there! God spoke into that darkness and turmoil and used His words in a constructive, creative, redemptive, and helpful way. This is a sermon in itself, but a good resolution for us would be to emulate our Creator by determining to use all our words in the same way: Constructively, creatively, redemptively, helpfully.

God's second resolution, as our New Testament readings tell us, is that long *before* those creative words were spoken, God resolved to enter into creation and become human for a time when the time was right; or, as Paul expresses it, "in the fullness of time." Notice this was not a second thought on God's part, as if a corrective to something that had gone totally wrong. Even before He spoke the words of Creation, God resolved to do this. John's gospel begins by telling us the Word Who was God, spoken to set the created order into motion, entered into what He had made to become part of that created order. The Artist became a living part of His handiwork, the Word became flesh; God became a human being, a Person through Whom all creation would find redemption. He

became involved with the object of His devotion and creation. By the way, this is another divine resolution it would be good for us to emulate ... become *involved* with the people you profess to be the objects of your devotion. If you are a parent, resolve to become more intimately involved with the objects of your creation, your children!

Before the foundation of the world, God resolved we would be His children, destined ... actually, the word Paul uses in Ephesians is *pre*-destined ... for adoption in and through that Word became flesh, Jesus Christ. Here is that bugaboo Presbyterian word, "predestination," about which so much ink has been spilled over the centuries. Please note: predestination has far less to do with a doctrine about who is in and who is out than it has to do with God's *resolve*: God resolved for us, He predestined us, in and through the love of Christ, to be adopted children who will be holy and blameless before Him, to live "for the praise of His Glory." Predestination has a purpose beyond our individual benefit. It has a purpose that serves God's purposes; we are to live for the praise of God's Glory! "For the praise of God's glory" ... now, I know those words sound almost cliché-ish, like religious gobbledygook which have little or no practical application in life outside this sanctuary, but if understood and taken seriously, these words really are an all-encompassing resolve for life. Simply put, to "live for the praise of God's glory" is to live each moment as if God is real to us, as if we take Him and His precepts and His ideals *seriously*. We aren't to try to play God, figuring who's in and who's out, no ... we are to go out to *live* for God, to the praise of His Glory, speaking good words, resolving to do and doing constructive, redemptive, helpful things; in a word, being living embodiments of the glorious reality of the God we worship in all we do and say. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us, our chief purpose in life is to "Glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

And if we read our lesson from Ephesians carefully, we read God's ultimate resolution is for all things ... not just some things, not just an elect few ... for *all* things in heaven and on earth to one day come together under one head, even Christ. God's resolve for this world is not limited to us alone. God's resolve is to finally gather up all things in Christ: including that rebellious child, that obstinate neighbor, that non-believing spouse, that atheistic parent. That is why Christ came. *Our* part is to live for the praise of God's glory ... and trust God will take care of the rest. This has been God's resolution from the very beginning, from even before the very beginning. God ordered this universe in such a way that all things will return to Him in and through Jesus Christ.

In the meantime, we are to live for the praise of God's glory. How do we do that? Again, by living each moment as if we take God seriously, as if God is real to us, to live as if we take Him and His precepts and His ideals seriously ... allowing our lives to display of the glory of God wherever we live, work or play. I like a list of resolutions one pastor prepared to encourage his congregation to live for the praise of God's glory ... the Uncola resolutions, "7-UPS for the New Year."

1. The first "up" is WAKE UP. Wake up and begin each day with the attitude you are receiving that day as a gift from the Lord. It really is a gift to be alive, and it is a gift that needs to be received and used joyfully. The day really is the day the Lord has made. Rejoice and be glad in it.
2. The second "up" is DRESS UP. The most important article of "clothing" we need to put on each day is a smile. Put on a smile. If for no other reason than it improved your looks. And you'd be surprised how often the attitude follows the facial framework.
3. The third "up" is SHUT UP. (*And this may be the first time I said "Shut up!" from the pulpit!*) Watch your tongue. Don't gossip. Don't say destructive, corrosive, degrading and/or discouraging things. Learn to talk less and listen more!
4. The fourth "up" sounds somewhat contradictory to the last one, but it is SPEAK UP. Say nice things, good things. Determine to use your words for constructive, creative, encouraging and redemptive purposes. Speak up and take a stand for what you believe. Speak against evil. Speak for the good.
5. The fifth "up" is LOOK UP. Determine each and every day to lift your eyes to the Lord. After all, He is our only Savior. Set your heart and mind on things above, on higher things. Look up and determine to always keep your eyes and heart out of the gutters and debased cellars of life.
6. The sixth "up" is related to the fifth, and it is to REACH UP. Spend time in prayer reaching up to our Lord for help, for consolation, for strength, for aid. Reach up with your adorations, confessions, thanksgivings and supplications to the Lord.
7. And finally, LIFT UP ... determine to be available to help lift up those in need by serving, supporting, and sharing. Be an elevating, lifting presence to all who come your way. Lift others up; don't bring them down.

Wake up, dress up, shut up, speak up, look up, reach up and lift up. All ways of living out what should be our one all-encompassing resolution ... to live **FOR THE PRAISE OF GOD'S GLORY** in 2011!