

Risky Resolutions

Matthew 2:12

First Sunday in New Year

2nd January 2011

Have you made any resolutions for this coming year of 2011? And I know it's a bit early to ask this question but are you managing to keep your resolutions? If not, take heart because there's one you have actually already kept: Your decision to come to church every Sunday. The very fact you are here in church today means you already have a 100% record! Now, if you can just keep it up for the next 51 Sundays!

I read about one man who decided only to make resolutions he could actually keep. So he resolved to stop exercising, gain weight, spend less time with the family, watch more TV, procrastinate more, stop giving money to charity, not date any *Playboy* models, and never make New Year's resolutions again.¹ And, believe it or not, at the end of the year, he was successful!

We might be tempted to make easy resolutions but underneath it all, don't we really wish we could make more demanding resolutions? Resolutions that will change our lives for the better? Resolutions that will help us grow as individuals and really become the people we want to be?

Rather than again this year just shrugging off this whole matter in a defeatist manner, why don't we really try and make big resolutions. Meaningful resolutions. Resolutions worth keeping. Resolutions that will make a difference to our lives.

Now, whatever the resolutions we decide upon, let's make sure they are specific in nature. Let's make concrete resolutions. Not just vague, airy-fairy ones that have no particular goal in mind. Because, if we don't know where we want to go in the first place, we certainly won't get there.

In Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice says to the Cheshire Cat, "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat. "I don't much care where," said Alice. "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat. "I don't much care where... so long as I get SOMEWHERE," Alice added as an explanation. "Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."²

So, if our New Year's resolutions are going to make a difference, they must be resolutions with a clear goal in mind. Not just "somewhere" resolutions.

Then the resolutions we make must be ones that we own. Not the resolutions that our family or friends or magazine articles tell us we should make. But our own personal resolutions.

Human resources expert, Susan M. Heathfield,

draws on her knowledge of goal-setting in management as a guide to making resolutions and says that, "Whether the goal is a promotion at work, a streamlined work process, a new customer, a published article, an exercise program or weight loss, the goal must be your goal. You are unlikely to achieve your manager's goal, your spouse's goal or the goal you think you 'ought' to work on this year. Your goals must generate excitement when you ponder their accomplishment. You must believe there is something in it for you to accomplish them."³

Also, if you are going to achieve your resolutions you must commit yourself to them. Hanging loose guarantees failure but commitment increases the possibility of your resolutions working a hundred-fold.

Scottish climber, William Hutchison Murray, wrote a book entitled, aptly, *Mountaineering in Scotland*. It was a remarkable book, not only because he wrote it while in prisoner of war camps in Italy, Germany and Czechoslovakia, but because he wrote it on the only paper available to him in such an extreme situation – he wrote it on toilet paper!

In the book, Murray talks about commitment and says, "Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, (leading) always (to) ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative and creation, (the need for commitment) is the one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans. (But) the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favour all manner of unforeseen incidents, meetings and material assistance which no man could have dreamed would have come his way. I have learned a deep respect for one of Goethe's couplets: 'Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it! Boldness has genius, magic, and power in it.'"⁴

So, as the New Year begins, we need to have clearly-identified resolutions. We need resolutions that we own personally. And we need to commit ourselves to these resolutions.

But what actual resolutions should we make? Of course, it's always good to make the traditional resolutions: stop smoking, become fitter, get organised. However, let's go even further this year and make resolutions that will change, not just personal habits and behaviour, but our whole attitude to life.

Let's, for instance, resolve not to be obsessed by the details but constantly to look at the bigger picture.

At the beginning of one new year, a high school principal challenged his teachers to give him their resolutions to post on the school notice-board. After they were duly pinned up, one teacher threw a hissy fit in the hallway when she found hers were not included with the others. "That just shows nobody ever listens to me," she fumed angrily to her colleagues, "Nobody ever takes me seriously." Returning to his office, the principal discovered he had mislaid her resolutions on his desk. As he went to put them up on the notice-board, he was amazed to see that her very first resolution was: "Don't sweat the small stuff."⁵

So often we get all worked up about small stuff that is neither here nor there. But, let's resolve this year to reserve our passion for the big issues. Rather than being upset by someone jumping the line-up at the store, let's dole out a good dose of righteous anger, say, about the West's lack of action in helping African countries battle AIDS, or Iran's brutal treatment of women, or China's disdain for human rights. And not just righteous anger in terms of sounding-off but the kind of anger that will lead to action through support for, say *Amnesty International* or the Canadian Churches' social justice movement *Kairos*, or our own *Presbyterian World Service and Development*, organisations that are all working hard to make a concrete difference on issues of poverty, hunger and human rights around the world.

Also, let's resolve – whatever happens in 2011 – that we won't play safe but, with God's help, be willing to take calculated risks and embrace life's big challenges.

In the movie, *The Tin Cup*, Roy McAvoy played by actor Kevin Costner is a happy-go-lucky, underachieving golf pro who finds himself miraculously playing in the U.S. Open. Tied for the lead on the final day of the tournament, he faces a critical decision on a very difficult shot on the last hole: take a big risk, go for the green, and win, or play it safe, make par, and force a playoff. Risk it all or play it safe? This is a critical moment for Roy. In fact, Roy uses his favourite expression to sum up his situation: "Define the moment or the moment defines you."⁶ So, rather than laying up at the 18th hole, he decides to risk everything and go straight for the hole – with dramatic results.

If ever there were individuals on this planet who defined the moment and embraced great challenges, then it was those three Wise Men who travelled from ancient Persia to Bethlehem.⁷ They risked all for a belief they could not substantiate. They risked all by looking for answers outside their own religion of Zoroastrianism. They risked all by going to visit Herod. They risked all to carry out their mission to go to Bethlehem and find the Christ-child.

Let's resolve this coming year that we won't hesitate to define the moment and embrace the big

challenges with which life faces us. Like the Three Wise Men, let us be willing to risk all for Christ's sake.

We have to remember, of course, that no resolution, no matter how good, is ever enough to change our lives. What we really need is a revolution. A revolution of heart and mind. The kind of revolution that only one person can produce and that is Jesus.

One writer says that making a resolution is simply a makeover, a temporary measure, reforming and refashioning the old stuff within us. What we really need, he says, is a New Year's Revolution, a complete inner transformation of our hearts by our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, so they will beat in time with God's heart.⁸

And it can happen, if we will pray – and really mean – that prayer contained in the lovely old carol sung at Christmas time, "O come to my heart Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for thee."⁹ When we sincerely make that prayerful invitation to the Child of Bethlehem, it will make a revolutionary difference to our lives in 2011 that no ordinary resolution could ever make.

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¹ King Duncan, "The Guiding Light for a New Year", Dynamic Preaching, 2005, www.eSermons.com, adapted

² Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, Tribeca Books, 2010

³ Suan M. Heathfield, *The Awesome Power of Goal Setting*, About.com Guide

⁴ William H. Murray, *Mountaineering in Scotland*, Baton Wicks Publications, 1997. Quotation adapted for clarity.

⁵ King Duncan, "A Great and Wonderful New Year", op. cit., adapted

⁶ King Duncan, "The Defining Moment", op. cit.

⁷ Matthew 2:1-12

⁸ Tim Timmons, *The Embers Fellowship*, <http://embersfellowship.blogspot.com>

⁹ "Thou didst leave Thy throne", Hymn #204, The Book of Praise, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1997