

From Resolution To Revolution

Matthew 2:1-12

1st Sunday in the New Year

1st January 2012

I wonder how 2011 turned out for you. I personally didn't think that last year was the worst of years. Not as good as some but not as bad as others. However, when I checked Facebook yesterday, I found to my surprise quite a few people complaining that 2011 was the worst year they had had in a long time and they were glad to see the end of it. "Goodbye 2011," said one, "Don't let the door hit your back on the way out." Or words to that effect! "Bye-bye 2011," said another, "You won't be missed." Yet another, "So long 2011. Don't come back this way again!"

Maybe, for some people, 2011 was just one of those years when nothing went right and everything just seemed to be turned upside down.

There was once a somewhat challenged farmer who had a rather casual manner about even the most urgent things in life. One day he stopped to talk to his neighbours and nonchalantly informed them that, earlier that morning, he had seen their son stuck in a mud hole. "How deep is he sunk?" the boy's father asked. "Oh, about up to his ankles," the farmer replied lazily. "Well," said the father, "I think we have time to sit awhile and have a drink before we go help him." "I don't think so," drawled the laid-back farmer. "You see, he's not only up to his ankles in the hole. He's in head first!"

Up to the ankles and in head first. That may well be the way that life was for some people over the past year. Maybe it was that kind of year, not just for others, but for some of us. Maybe we got in over our heads with different problems and misfortunes and there were no easy answers. No easy way out.

We can't, of course, go back and change the past year. We can't turn 2011's failures into successes, or its losses into gains, or our weaknesses over past months into strengths. But maybe, just maybe, we can do something to alter the pattern of things in the coming year and make 2012 a much better year in many different ways.

To do that, of course, means that we have to decide that we are going to make those changes that are necessary to bring about a new way of things in our own personal lives and in the world around us. It means we have to resolve that 2012 is going to be a better year than last. In other words, we have to make New Year's resolutions.

"New Year's resolutions?" you say, "You can't be serious. They just never work out. With the best will in the world. They always end in disappointment."

If that's the way you feel, remember the late Erma Bombeck. She was never too happy with the whole idea of New Year's resolutions but, still, she made some good ones over the years. Here are one or two:

- I will go to no doctor whose office plants have died.
- I'm going to follow my husband's suggestion and put a

little excitement into my life. This year, I am going to live within our budget.

- I will never loan my car to anyone to whom I have given birth.
- And just like last year...I am going to remember that my children need love the most when they deserve it the least.¹

Then, also, if making resolutions is a scary proposition for you, take heart from the comfort that writer Ed McManus offers to all who set out on this path. "Don't worry about [keeping] those New Year's resolutions," he says. "You only have to deal with them until around about February and then you can give them up for Lent!"²

Making resolutions may be something we avoid like the plague. Let's remember, though, if we ever want to achieve anything worthwhile in life, we have to make a resolution at some point. Whether at the New Year or at another time. If we ever want to make some dream come true, then we have resolve that we will work to realise it. If we ever want to make a difference in our lives, and change things for the better, then resolution is the all-important first-step that will lead to the desired reality.

I think it would be safe to say that nothing significant or important or worthwhile in life has ever been achieved without someone having resolved at some point that a particular change will come about or a particular goal will be attained. One only needs to mention the names of those who have made great contributions to our world to be reminded of the power of resolution. The likes of Martin Luther, or Isaac Newton, or William Wilberforce, or Alexander Graham Bell, or Ludwig van Beethoven, or Thomas Edison, or Banting & Best, or Martin Luther King, or Nelson Mandela.

Or, we could even single out these three Wise Men who, 2000 years ago, journeyed from Persia (modern day Iran) to find the baby Jesus and help make known to the rest of the world that the Messiah had been born. Their long and perilous journey could only have been undertaken and completed as the result of their steadfast and unswerving resolution to follow the Star of Bethlehem. All great endeavours in this world – whether those by notable people in history or by ordinary people like ourselves – don't just come about through happenstance or coincidence or luck. They have to begin by a definite act of resolve.

Bearing this in mind, here are a couple of suggestions of resolutions that we might make for this coming year of 2012.

First, a resolution that we might make as a congregation. Let's resolve to think positively in the weeks and months ahead. To look for the up-side rather than the down-side. To expect the best rather than the worst. To focus on future opportunities rather than on potential obstacles.

In his book of some years ago *The Power of Positive Thinking*,³ Norman Vincent Peale showed how individuals and groups could make a radical difference to their lives by tapping the hidden potential of a change in attitude from the negative to the positive, from the pessimistic to the optimistic, from defeatist thinking to possibility thinking.

Now Peale's psychological approach is far from being the whole of the Gospel,⁴ yet St. Paul himself showed what a great power positive thinking can have when Christians see themselves as athletes running a race whose gold medal award is Jesus Christ. "This one thing I do is to forget what lies behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead. So I run straight towards the goal in order to win the prize which is God's call through Jesus Christ."⁵

So, this coming year, as God's people in this place, let's make up our minds to be positive thinkers – especially as we enter a time of transition in ministry.

Such transition is, of course, not an experience that we are used to here in St. Paul's. We have only had two ministers in the past 50 years while other churches around us might have had as many as 10 or 15 in that same period of time.

Transition in ministry is difficult to deal with, whether a minister leaves for another church or retires, because it involves a grieving period, a time of loss, a time of adjustment, a time of uncertainty – for all parties involved, congregation and minister. This is normal and natural. But if we approach this time of transition positively, then we will see that it offers a great opportunity for renewal, for re-assessment, for refocusing, in terms of re-equipping our church for the future, finding new ways to strengthen our congregation, new ways to reach out and serve the local community, as well as rediscovering our essential mission here at the heart of our city.

So, as a congregation, let's resolve to adopt as positive an attitude as possible to our church and all that is happening with regard to this forthcoming time of transition.

But, in addition to thinking positively about our church in 2012, though, let's also make a resolution, as individual Christians, to renew our faith in Jesus Christ during this coming year.

Faith, of course, is not something we only exercise on a Sunday morning in church. On the contrary, it's an essential spiritual commodity we need to cope with the stresses and strains of life day after day. It's a fundamental part of successful living in the secular sphere. And that's because it gives us an inner strength we can find nowhere else.

Writer, David C. Slutz, tells of a journey made by two scientists on board a small submarine to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. The goal was to determine whether life could exist in a world without light, where the water pressure was so great that it would crush a human like a bird under a front tire. When they got to the bottom, the scientists were absolutely amazed to discover an abundance of marine life of all sorts and varieties – from giant crabs to bizarre-looking fish. How, they wondered, could such fragile creatures survive where the water pressure was so massive? The answer

was simple and obvious: The pressure inside each of these creatures had to be equal to that outside.⁶

And that's what renewed faith in Jesus Christ does for us. It builds up spiritual strength created by an internal pressure more than equal to the external pressure with which we have to contend, day in, day out, in the world around us. And so, with this kind of faith, we can handle life in the triumphant spirit of Paul when he says, "We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt but never in despair ... and though badly hurt at all times, we are not destroyed."⁷

During this coming year of 2012, we can achieve a great deal for our church and in our lives as Christians and we can make it a very good year. But only if we are people of resolution. Only if we resolve to think positively and only if we resolve to renew our faith.

Of course, with the best will in the world, we might find it difficult to hold to the resolutions we make for 2012. Unforeseen events and circumstances may very well challenge us and try to thwart our inner decisiveness. But if we constantly look to him who, the writer to the Hebrews says, is "the author and finisher of our faith"⁸ then a miracle of transcendence will take place. We will be empowered to rise above whatever comes our way in the year that lies ahead. Empowered by none other than Christ himself. And, through us, and in us, he will achieve those things we have resolved to achieve and those things for which we so earnestly strive.

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St. Paul's Presbyterian Church
Peterborough, Ontario

¹ King Duncan, "New Beginnings", www.eSermons.com, Dynamic Preaching First Quarter 2009, King Duncan, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2009, 0-000-0000-20

² Ed McManus, The Jokester, www.jokester.com

³ Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Cedar Books, London, 1990

⁴ One writer said that he found "Peale appalling but Paul appealing"!

⁵ Philippians 3:13,14

⁶ David C. Slutz, *Vital Christianity*, September 1994

⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:8,9

⁸ Hebrews 12:2