

## ***Sermon “Commendable Resolutions” (Ps 81; Phil 4:4-9)***

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*“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”*  
(Philippians 4:4-9)

Let us consider this famous passage in the apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians. At a total of four chapters, this epistle is easy to read. It includes a very encouraging message for us. Some scholars call it ‘the epistle of joy.’ This is especially meaningful and remarkable since Paul wrote it while he was in prison. In the fourth chapter, Paul gives us a wise message about rejoicing in the Lord. He advises us about how we would do well to focus our thoughts.

There are three key points to address. First, New Year’s resolutions can reveal our anxieties. Second, God in the Bible promises us new beginnings. And third, we’re not to worry about New Year’s resolutions, but continually pray to God about what causes us anxiety.

So let’s think about New Year’s resolutions. On the first day of the year, my husband and I wrote down our resolutions for 2011. They mainly fit into the categories of moral or spiritual life, intellectual or career development, and physical fitness and diet. As we talked, we realized that we’d better think of them as goals that we would like to accomplish. Somehow the term ‘resolution’ makes me nervous that a wavering of resolve may seem irreparable.

We decided to state our goals positively, rather than focus on what not to do. We also broke down our goals into a weekly time frame. So for example, it would be good to exercise two or three times a week, instead of trying to lose a certain number of pounds by the end of the year. We also tried to make room for grace, hoping for success in about fifty out of the fifty-two weeks of the year, to allow for lapses in case of illness or going on vacation.

*The New Year’s resolutions we determine can reveal our anxieties.* We may get worried: am I accomplishing enough? Am I wasting my time? Looking back on the year 2010, now that it is over, we may feel frustrated or disappointed about discarded resolutions or goals that we set aside. We may feel anxious that this year’s ambitious plans may end up as merely good intentions. In our society, we face a lot of pressure to achieve more and more things, to look a certain way, to fulfill great dreams. There seems to be a proverbial ten pounds that people keep meaning to lose, no matter what size clothes they currently wear!

We can get our minds so caught up in our priorities- fixated on that one thing that we think we need or that will really make us feel happy or satisfied or important or loved- that we can’t see what’s truly important. On a deeper level we realize that making resolutions assumes that everything is in our control. But we know that there are factors beyond us that we cannot

change to make our goals come true- the economy, world events, family issues and even our vitality can be altered in a moment. All of these factors contribute to making us feel anxious as we establish our resolutions.

*God in the Bible promises us new beginnings.* I chose Psalm 81 to go with this passage because it speaks of praising God with music at the time of the new moon. How appropriate for the start of a new calendar year! I did some research on the Lord's instructions in Scripture regarding the observances required at the new moon. God's people were to bring specific unblemished animals to give as sacrifices. The most important festival of the new moon is called the Feast of the Trumpets, to which this psalm refers. It is at the start of the month of Tishri in the Jewish calendar, in September/October. It is just before the High Holy Days of the Jewish New Year. This is one of the three main festivals that are highlights of the Jewish year. Jesus celebrated these annual feasts with his family by traveling to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem.

So the meaning behind the observance of God's festivals is to bring us to remember that God is faithful, the one true Lord. He calls us to obedience to him. In fulfilling our obligations we draw closer in relationship to him. We learn to trust God to provide what we need. We are invited to turn away from focusing on ourselves, our resolutions and goals, and turn to the Lord. As we look closely at this psalm, we find that God is speaking to call us back to faithfulness.

*"Hear, O my people, while I admonish you; O Israel, if you would but listen to me! There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god. I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it. ... O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways! ... I would feed you with the finest of the wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you" (Ps 81:8-10, 13, 16).*

God is offering us beautiful benefits in his presence, if only we would return to him! Instead of seeking to complete our agenda on our terms, God calls us to acknowledge him as our Lord. He is telling us that focusing on ourselves and our ambitions can become idolatry. We need to seek him and his will first, not be driven by those other things we desire. If we set our hearts on other things, we will surely be disappointed. If we are determined to set ourselves up as masters of our life, we dethrone God in our heart and nothing good can come of that.

But God's Word does not only judge us. When we come to our senses and realize that we have lost our way, he kindly calls us back to himself. He is our Savior, who redeems us from our troubles-- just as he freed Israel from slavery in Egypt. The Lord of the Bible continually reaches out to us with an outstretched arm to save us. God offers us a new beginning! This is *not* the fresh start like a new year in which we have to get busy and work hard to prove ourselves by making and completing new resolutions. There is a different quality to the new beginning that God freely gives us. It is as though our sin and disobedience never existed! God promises us through the prophet Jeremiah: "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer 31:34). This astounding promise makes the Judeo-Christian tradition unique! We serve the God who does not hold a grudge or remind us of our failures.

The *new beginning* of God's forgiveness is counter-cultural. It makes no sense! God repeatedly offers and grants us a fresh start. In seeking to model our attitudes and actions on God's forgiveness, we may realize what a great level of risk is involved. People are prone to

disappoint us when we place our trust in them, but as people of faith we seek to extend to others the forgiveness that we have received.

There is a conversation between two characters in Jane Austen's masterpiece *Pride and Prejudice* that illustrates this point. I believe that this conversation is the pivot point of the whole novel. It is in the second volume of three, Chapter XVII. The main character Elizabeth Bennet has received a letter from the hero Mr. Darcy which explains the truth about a young man named Wickham. Elizabeth, her sisters and friends had been charmed by him but had no idea of his serious misdeeds. Mr. Darcy and his younger sister unfortunately know from personal experience that Wickham cannot be trusted. Among other troubles, he tried to seduce her to marry her for her fortune, then through a series of lies tried to make Darcy appear dishonorable. Elizabeth asks her older sister Jane if they should tell everyone about Wickham's true character. They need to figure out if they should judge or show mercy.

The question is does a person's behavior in the past determine how he will act in the future? The issue is complicated by the desire to shield Darcy's sister from disgrace. The Bennet sisters discuss it, wishing that perhaps Wickham would leave town soon and cause no further damage. Elizabeth resolves not to tell anyone. Jane agrees, saying, "You are quite right. To have his errors made public might ruin him for ever. He is now perhaps sorry for what he has done, and anxious to re-establish a character. We must not make him desperate" (148). So the sisters decide to align themselves on the side of hope. They wish him to have an inner reform and seek to protect him from despair and shame. Wickham is, without knowing it, given another chance to go forward and act honorably. Sadly, he does not choose to mend his ways. Ironically, Elizabeth and Jane's silence opens the way for him to ensnare their youngest sister Lydia. This near-disaster becomes the driving force of the rest of the story. It inspires Mr. Darcy to intervene with generous help to restore her and the good name of their family. Those experiences also serve to test and prove his love for Elizabeth.

Sometimes it is good to be like the elder Bennet sisters and be hopeful about new beginnings. At times, it is wise to let the past remain in the past, for ourselves and others. On New Year's Eve, a classical music station played "Pomp and Circumstance," a piece traditionally associated with graduation ceremonies. It brought me to a new perspective on the old year. Some people may be sad to see 2010 with its happy memories go. For others, it was a difficult year of personal disappointments or professional challenges or even marked by tragedy. It can be refreshing to graduate, in a sense, from the previous year. We can be free to move forward into the new year God has for us.

*We are not to worry about New Year's resolutions, but continually pray to God about what causes us anxiety.* These days, we tend to get stressed out by trying to reach our goals. One dangerous way of looking at Paul's message in Philippians 4 is as a primer on more things that we ought to do and not do! It can sound daunting to hear that we should "Rejoice in the Lord always...Rejoice [and] let your gentleness be known to everyone" (4-5). Then there is a whole list of things that we ought to be thinking about: "whatever is honorable, just, pure, whatever is pleasing, commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (8).

Yet the purpose of Paul's counsel here is not to burden us but to direct our hearts and minds to the Lord who is near. He assures us that the way to let go of worrying is to be diligent

in prayer, speaking to the Lord continually throughout our day and night. He says, “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (6). Praying to God in every situation will bring “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, [which] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (7). By guiding our thoughts to what is good and commendable, and by doing what we have learned from Paul’s teaching of Christ “the God of peace will be with you” (9). What a gift! Perhaps when we consider the year ahead of us, the most commendable resolution we can make is to continually pray to God.

In response to the promises of the Word of God preached in this sermon, we will receive the Lord’s Supper. The risen Lord Jesus invites all who have been baptized in his name, who trust in him, to share in the feast of bread and the cup at his table. It is a joyful celebration of communion with him, with one another, and with all the faithful. The Lord’s Supper is a gift we receive to nurture and strengthen us for our journey. This beautiful gift is from the One who said: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it. ... I would feed you with the finest of the wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you” (Psalm 81:10, 16).

When we become anxious about our goals or resolutions, when we get distracted by these other things, may we lift up our hearts to the Lord in prayer. May his Spirit cause us to remember the grace we receive in this joyful feast gathered at his table. May we know the God of peace who is, and will be, with us throughout this new year and always. Amen.