

The Making and Breaking of Resolutions
A Sermon for Every Sunday
New Year's Day

One of the ways I know the year is coming to an end is when I see the big stack of calendars on my secretary's desk. This has been Joyce's tradition for as long as I've known her: she buys up all these beautiful calendars from somewhere and brings them to work and then invites anyone who will to dig through the stack and choose one. I'm sure you've seen calendars like these. They have big, glossy pictures of places like Tuscany, or Paris, or the Swiss Alps—one for each month—and then down below the actual days marked out in little squares. This year I chose the "Beaches in Paradise" calendar because I have a feeling that in the next few weeks winter will actually come, and I will start yearning for sand, and surf, and sunshine.

But I've been thinking about that big stack of calendars because, in some ways, that's what we've got in front of us this morning. How we structure the worship service and where we put the emphasis depends largely on which calendar we use, and today we have several choices. One option is to use that calendar that tells us today is the Second Sunday of Christmas, since Christmas is not just a day but a season, and since it goes on for twelve full days (as the song says). That would put this Sunday just past the halfway mark in Christmastide, which would mean that we could and probably should sing all the carols we can stand, and read passages of Scripture that continue to tell the story of the baby Jesus, and hear a sermon about what it means (what it really, *really* means) that God chose to come among us as one of us.

A second option would be to look ahead to Epiphany, which technically doesn't get here until the twelve days of Christmas are over on January 6th. But if we wait until next Sunday to celebrate—January 8th—Epiphany will be a thing of the past. So, perhaps I should seize the opportunity while we have it, and spend the next twenty minutes talking about the things we usually celebrate on that day: the star of Bethlehem, and the visit of the Magi, and what it means that light came into the world at Christmas.

But then there's this third option, which is to stop looking at the Christian calendar altogether and start looking at one of those calendars Joyce was giving away, where this Sunday is clearly designated as New Year's Day, and—with a few small exceptions—that's the option we're going to go with. I'm going to assume that some of you watching this sermon were out till way after midnight on New Year's Eve, celebrating the arrival of 2017. Some of you were probably wearing funny hats and making lots of noise and doing who knows what else, and if I've anticipated your mood correctly you are now slightly embarrassed about it all, grateful for the clean slate of a New Year, and ready to make some resolutions.

So, what will they be?

I did an Internet search last week and came up with the top 10 resolutions for 2017. Here they are, in no particular order. Feel free to write them down if you're still trying to make up your mind.

1. Spend more time with family and friends
2. Get in shape
3. Lose some weight
4. Quit smoking
5. Enjoy life more
6. Quit drinking
7. Get out of debt
8. Learn something new

9. Help others
10. Get organized

I'm guessing that some of these things are already on your list, or will be. I also couldn't help noticing that these resolutions not only suggest the kind of people we want to be, but also the kind of people we are. Apparently, as a nation, we are overweight and out of shape, we smoke and drink too much, we are in debt and disorganized, self-centered and stuck in a rut, living lonely and lackluster lives. On the other hand, if we could not only make these resolutions but keep them, we would be people who laugh easily with family and friends, who exercise regularly and look terrific, who enjoy lives free of any kind of addiction, people whose lives run smoothly, who have plenty of money, who tutor kids at the local elementary school and take pottery classes on Thursday nights. In other words, we would be people who are living the good life! That's what we want, and that's why we make those kinds of resolutions.

I also couldn't help noticing that it's not just one area of our lives we want to improve, but all of them. Those resolutions seem to fall into four different categories, and if I could borrow the biblical terms I would call those categories "heart, mind, soul, and strength"—the four aspects of human being. Under *heart* you might list spending more time with family and friends and enjoying life more. Under *mind* you might list learning something new or getting organized. Under *soul* you might list helping others or even getting out of debt, since that's one of the things that can trouble your soul. And under *strength* you would list those other things: eating right and exercising, giving up smoking and drinking. In other words, our New Year's resolutions often involve every

aspect of our being—heart, mind, soul, and strength—which reflects the truth that we want our whole life to be better, not only part of it.

Can I tell you about something that has been helpful to me? Once every three months or so I try to go on a 24-hour spiritual retreat. I just get away by myself somewhere. In the spring and fall I often go to a state park and camp. In the summer and winter I tend to look for something a little more climate-controlled. I used to go to a Benedictine monastery when I was in North Carolina and loved it there, chanting with the monks in worship five or six times a day and eating with them in their refectory. I loved the little room they gave me—my “cell”—with just a single bed, a comfortable chair, and a desk in it. One of the first things I did then and one of the first things I tend to do on every retreat is to make out a new weekly schedule. I just draw a grid on a piece of paper, dividing it up into the days of the week and the hours of the day. But over on the right hand margin I write the words *heart, mind, soul, and strength*, and then I try to make a place for each of those things in my weekly schedule.

In the *heart* category I think about the things I love, and try to make sure I have some time for those in my week: spending time with my family, going to the art museum, walking in the woods, watching a good movie. In the *mind* category I try to remember that if I’m not taking in something new from time to time I won’t be able to give anything out. In years past I’ve scheduled Tuesday afternoons for reading and regularly worked through a big stack of books at a local coffee house. In the *soul* category, again, if I don’t take anything in I won’t be able to give anything out. Recently I decided to give up an hour I wasn’t using in the evening and instead use it for prayer in the morning. It’s been hard to go to bed earlier, and hard to get up earlier, but I’m beginning to get the hang of

it. And then in the *strength* category I just try to make sure that I schedule time for regular exercise, and if I can do that it also seems to affect what I eat and how much and helps me feel better overall.

It's been a good system for me, and it helps me focus on every aspect of my being, but if I'm going to tell you that then I also need to tell you this: that I have to make out a new schedule every time I go on a 24-hour retreat because inevitably, in three months time, my old schedule has been compromised. For example: I may decide that I'm going to exercise at 6:30 three mornings a week—Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. For a while everything goes like clockwork, but then someone asks me if I can come to a breakfast meeting at 7:30 at Perly's on Friday and I think, "Well, not unless I run to Perly's, have breakfast, and then run home. But maybe just this once wouldn't hurt. And besides, I love their pancakes." And so I make an exception, and then another one, and then another one. By the time I get to my next 24-hour retreat I have to start all over again, drawing new lines on a clean sheet of paper and taking back some of the precious time I've given away, making sure that I have what I need to nourish my heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Once a year is not enough for me, and if the truth be told once every three months is probably not enough. It's not that I don't have good intentions, it's just that every other thing in the world seems to conspire against those kinds of intentions and the same can be said for our New Year's resolutions. Not that you would, but let's just say you made up your mind to come to church every Sunday in 2017. Well, here you are today, you're off to a good start, but what if someone calls you on Thursday and says, "Hey, it's finally turned cold. Let's go skiing this Sunday"? Or what if you get a call from your

sister who says, “Hey, Mom’s not doing so well. Do you think you could drive down and check on her this weekend?” Or what if you wake up next Sunday feeling awful, with something that’s probably contagious, where you wouldn’t be doing anybody any favors to come to church? Do you see what I mean? Resolutions are fine as long as nothing is working against them, but something almost always is. It takes a tremendous amount of discipline to keep our New Year’s resolutions, a tremendous amount of drive and determination. No wonder we have to make new ones every year and no wonder they are usually the same ones we made the year before. We are human beings, frail and fallible. We need help. Which is why God sent his son into the world at Christmas time: not to help us have the life we want, but to help us have the life we need.

On the first Sunday of each new year, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, would regularly urge his congregations to “wholly give themselves up to God, and to renew at every point their covenant that the Lord should be their God.” At first hearing it sounds like just another New Year’s resolution, something like, “I resolve to be a better Christian this year.” But it’s not a resolution, it’s a covenant, and here’s the difference: while a resolution is something you can make or break on your own, a covenant is something you enter into with someone else. Probably the best modern example is the marriage covenant, where two people stand before a minister who asks, “Do you promise to take each other for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health?” They each say yes, but they know that their ability to keep those vows and to make that marriage work is largely dependent on that other person. If he walks out there’s not much she can do. If she gives up there’s not much he can do. But imagine a marriage in which one spouse is so loving, so giving, so generous, thoughtful,

and attentive that the other spouse is inspired to live up to those wedding vows, and who keeps them, faithfully, day after day, because there is so much to keep them for.

And now imagine that covenant you made with Christ all those years ago when you were baptized or confirmed, when you stood before a congregation and said, “Jesus is Lord.” Has he not been loving, giving, generous, thoughtful, and attentive in the years since then? Has he not inspired you every day, in every way, to keep up your end of the covenant? When I picture that relationship, I picture someone smiling. So, on this New Year’s Day I’d like to invite you to renew your covenant with Christ, to say in essence, “I’d do it all over again, Lord. I would make my solemn promises to you. And I would not only make them but keep them, because it’s not only up to me. This is not a New Year’s resolution it’s a covenant. You and I have entered into it together. And because we have I can be assured that even on those days when I find it hard to keep up my end of the bargain you will keep up yours. That’s just who you are, and that’s just how it is, and if I have anything to do with it, that’s how it will always be, so help me God.”

If those words speak for you, then listen to these words from John Wesley, written for a New Year’s covenant service, and if you can say Amen to them, then do!

In the old covenant, God chose Israel to be a special people and to obey the law.
Our Lord Jesus Christ, by his death and resurrection,
Has made a new covenant with all who trust in him.
We stand within this covenant and we bear his name.
On the one side, God promises in this covenant to give us new life in Christ.
On the other side, we are pledged to live not for ourselves but for God.
Today, therefore, we meet to renew the covenant which binds us to God.

The people stand, as able

Friends, let us claim the covenant God has made with his people,
And accept the yoke of Christ.

To accept the yoke of Christ means that we allow Christ to guide all that we do and are,
and that Christ himself is our only reward.
Christ has many services to be done;
Some are easy, others are difficult;
Some make others applaud us, others bring only reproach;
Some we desire to do because of our own interests; others seem unnatural.
Sometimes we please Christ and meet our own needs,
At other times we cannot please Christ unless we deny ourselves.
Yet Christ strengthens us and gives us the power to do all these things.
Therefore let us make this covenant of God our own.
Let us give ourselves completely to God,
Trusting in his promises and relying on his grace.

**I give myself completely to you, God.
Assign me to my place in your creation.
Let me suffer for you.
Give me the work you would have me do.
Give me many tasks
Or have me step aside while you call others.
Put me forward or humble me.
Give me riches or let me live in poverty.
I freely give all that I am and all that I have to you.
And now, holy God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
You are mine and I am yours. So be it.
May this covenant made on earth continue for all eternity.**

Amen.

—Jim Somerville, 2012