

Message Delivered at Christ Church
Saturday & Sunday, December 31st and January 1st
TEXTS: Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:15-21
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

Good morning, everybody; and welcome to this New Year's Day celebration! So it's New Year's Day morning. I came in at my usual time this morning. Early on Sunday mornings the traffic is generally pretty light. Let me tell you...when that Sunday morning is also New Year's Day, it's virtually non-existent...

I hope your celebration last night was what you had been hoping for. Mine was. I think I was in bed about 10:00. "Mr. Party," my friends call me.

I'm generally not a big New Year's Eve person. But I really do like New Year's. It's one of those times it seems we stop a bit, and reflect on where we've been or where we've been taken, and then receive the grace of a new beginning...get another shot at a new start. And I like that.

And like a lot of us, I make resolutions. And yes, I used the plural there. I should probably make just one, and see if I could actually keep it; but I'm a slow learner. But you know, I'm like everybody else...step back a bit...see some things in my life I'd like to change; do a little bit differently; maybe some things to improve, hopeful that that's possible. Because we all got places of incompleteness...maybe relationships that aren't where we'd like them to be; or character defects we'd like to see removed; or habits that make us less than we are intended to be; or things we don't know or skills we don't have that we really ought to have or know.

If we are representative of our nation, and statistically normal, 50% of us have made New Year's resolutions. We're going to lose weight, or get our finances in order, or reclaim old friendships, or spend more time with our family. Or maybe...we're going to read our Bible more; or spend more time in prayer; or give more away.

And you know what? Every one of these resolutions is good. Every one of the resolutions we make is something good. I've never met someone who has resolved to be greedier; or someone who has resolved to say more unkind things to other people; or someone who has resolved to do everything they can to make their health worse. It's good things we resolve to do. Maybe their big, and maybe their small, but they're all good...

So if you've made a New Year's resolution, know our prayers are with you. Go get 'em... We're in your corner, and on your side. I don't know what your resolution might be; but I'm sure it's a good thing, and we're in favor of good things around here.

But may I offer a small reminder this morning?

In the life of the Church, this day is called The Feast of the Holy Name. On the eighth day, Mary and Joseph took their firstborn child and gave him his name. The name he was given is Jesus; or Joshua in English today; or Iesusus in New Testament Greek; or Y'shua in Hebrew. The name is a conflation of two Hebrew words. One means "God;" the other means "helps, or saves." "The King of kings, salvation brings" as we just sang. That's what the name means. Matthew in his gospel is clear about the name's meaning. There, the angel tells Joseph that he will name the child Jesus because "he will save his people from their sins." He isn't named Jesus because we will save ourselves. He's given the name Jesus so that every time we say his name we're reminded of what God is up to.

The Apostle Paul reminds us today that we have all been made children of God. He was born of Mary to bring us in, and make us, ourselves, the children of God. That's who we are, God's children. So as we get ready to put our New Year's resolutions into action, we remember that we have all been adopted into God's family; and already all been claimed by the one who saves.

And though there may be many things we ask of ourselves at this time of year...again, all of them good things, worth striving for...maybe it's helpful to remember there is one thing God asks of us; one deep and heartfelt resolution God hopes we'll make: To come to the manger like the shepherds and then the kings; to do that first. Elsewhere...when he's all grown up...this baby will say "Seek first the kingdom of God, and its righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you..." Seek first the kingdom...first things first.

And that is the resolution...I would suggest...God hopes we will make. Not for a year, I might add...but just for now. We make big plans for the year. God is much more interested in today.

It is our human propensity to believe we can live life according to our own rules. It's been a problem for us since Adam and Eve. In response God comes and says "Why don't come to me and try trusting in me. See how it works out... Go ahead; make your resolutions. But what I'm really hoping is that you'll give a shot to putting me first, and see what happens..."

You see, I know there are things that we want to make our life better...things we think about a lot at this time of year. But I guess I'm pretty much convinced that there's one thing God truly wants...and that's us...you, and me. That's the resolution the saints, and angels, and martyrs, and prophets in heaven rejoice over, in concert with the loving God.

And not the fake you and me, but the real you and me...the whole thing. We all got faith; but we all also have fears. We all know joy and peace; but we also are sometimes worried and anxious. Sometimes we show mercy and justice just the way we're intended to; and sometimes we're petty and vindictive. Sometimes we serve heroically and give selflessly; and sometimes we're too busy, or too lazy, or too caught up in our own little worlds to lift a finger. We're all dark and light mixed together; brightness and shadow; imperfect human beings living imperfect human lives. That's the real you and the real me we offer...

And to all that, God says "Deal. I'll take it."

There may be many things we want for the new year. My hunch is that that's the one "whole thing" God wants for today.

Now that the Lord desires this resolution on our part to give ourselves to him...I hope that's something we find comfort in. That God really wants all of us...and all of us...is a good thing to hear.

But if it terrifies us a little, that wouldn't surprise me. After all, it caused shepherds to leave their flocks by night; it made Mary and Joseph parents before the nursery finished; it put the lives of the wise men at risk; and Jesus...well, he's the one who gave himself over completely, and it took him to a cross.

Invite God to take charge, and we don't know where we'll end up. The resolution to offer ourselves is a fiery sort of thing...it calls for some courage...because where it could take you is utterly unknown to anyone on earth. It could be anywhere. We could end up giving everything away; we could end up shedding more tears; we could end up doing something we don't think we can do or find ourselves someplace we don't think we should be; we could have more sleepless nights rather than less. It's not a safe path. If we want a God whose plan for us is to keep us safe, we should probably start looking for a different god. Mangers are safe. But he

doesn't stay there. Nor do Mary and Joseph, or the shepherds. And we don't get to stay there, either.

Seek God first, and we got no idea where we'll end up. But we certainly won't get bored; and we'll certainly have something more interesting to talk about than the neighbors' kids or what was on TV last night; and it will certainly give other people more to talk about than how good we look because we've kept our resolution to do 100 sit-ups every day; and it sure will change the world, right where we are.

So if this resolution of seeking God first is something that peaks our interest, the place we begin to fulfill it is on our knees...today; and then when tomorrow becomes today, today again; and then, when the next day becomes today, today again. None of us would ever assume that putting our finances in order is a function of balancing our checkbook only once. Got to do it time and time again. Same is true here.

Except that if we're alone when we're working on our finances, when we're on our knees, we're never alone. Every time we resolve to seek the kingdom of God first, that's a sign God's Spirit is already at work in us, helping us to "Abba; Father." Every time we even yearn to resolve to give ourselves over, that means God is already busy. It's that old adage you've heard countless times before...the surfer rides the wave, but before they get on their board, it's God who makes the wave.

Blessings to you this day...this New Year's Day...another day of giving ourselves over, and taking up a daily cross...this first of 366 (it's a leap year, everybody) single days.

May this year full of single days be one in which at some point we take a chance to trust this baby...who grows up fast...and let him carry us to the other side. May we allow him to provoke us, challenge us, stretch us, and disturb us. May we at some point be made so uncomfortable at the way our human kingdoms work that we pray "whatever you want, Lord, I'll do it." May we find ourselves at some point this year in such a pickle that only God can save us, and then let him do it...the way God wants to do it, not the way we want God to do it. May we be given eyes to see God already at work around us...right here, and in our cul-de-sac...and may be given such boldness that we would never dream anything less than what God would dream...which, I am convinced, is something greater and more meaningful and more life-changing and more world-changing than anything we may have resolved to accomplish on our own.