

FIRST LESSON: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26
SECOND LESSON: Colossians 3:12-17
THE GOSPEL: Luke 2:41-52

First Sunday of Christmas
December 30, 2018

“New Year’s Resolutions”
Sermon Preached by Pastor Lowell D. Nelson
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

May God’s peace, hope and joy be with you in this Christmas Sunday and then movement into the new year. Thank you for being here to worship and to end and start the year with such inspired worship, I appreciate it so much and glad to be with you.

New Year’s Resolutions – how many here enjoy this act of hope? Who here does resolutions? Oh my goodness, I have a lot of work to do to convince you that this is the year of faith based resolutions. I will encourage you to adopt those, and the encouragement comes from the word of God’s love.

I am going to start with the Gospel, it’s message. Over the three-year cycle...year A – Matthew, year B – Mark, year C – Luke. We get to hear of Jesus’ life, we get to hear one year about going to Egypt to escape the death penalty that was issued by Herod. Another year we get to hear about him being presented to the temple and the delight in hearing God’s prayers being answered. Then this story, 12 years old, Jesus, eldest son. Anybody here who is the eldest son understands this role, very important in a family. He takes it a little too far and does not say what he is going to do, which is to remain. For parents, this word that we never want to use, but comes back to haunt us, the word is assume. Never assume what your kids are doing. A couple weeks ago we had that word assume...it is an interesting word.

In this fellowship, the trip is long, well over a hundred miles, and you couldn’t travel the most direct route because it was through an area where the people were not friendly. It was a major effort, and there is a sense of comfort and joy how the family and friends were gathered, certainly it made sense to not fear anything. But just the anxiety I feel, I just remember losing sight of our children for just a brief amount of time in a store – have you ever had that? You turn and they are not there. It can’t be very long, but it is like an eternity, the anxiety. The anxiety for Mary and Joseph – can you imagine? It’s not just one day or two, but it takes them three days to find him. The questions, the concerns, where are you, who have you been with, how did you survive? All the things that would just be a normal parental concern.

The Bible is words of hope, and I think my mother would have responded differently – “your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety”. I think my mom would have expressed it differently, maybe a little swat on the rear end on that. Just the great anxiety, and yet in their response, and this living faithfulness. I am not going to put them entirely on a pedestal, but I just say they acted with a sense of compassion and kindness and tremendous patience, didn’t they? I give that encouragement for anyone. Yesterday for the baptism with a little precious three month old, I did the transitions, which is basically to the parents. “Have you heard of teenage years?” They just kind

of looked at me in fear, but this transition in a way for the youngest, and the patience we have for the crying and the fussing and all the messes that are made, is needed throughout life, isn't it? Patience for a teenager's active independence. I used to tease the confirmation kids, "I love how you guys try to be independent and assert your own identities by being like everybody else in your peer group. It's really excellent." But we all went through that in some phase. I just wanted to lift up that word "patience" for anyone here who is a parent, certainly for grandparents, to be patient and to understand in a world where there will be anxious moments. I give thanks for the witness of the gospel there.

In this word after they went back to Nazareth that he was obedient in that respect for parents, kids that are here and for those you know, this sense of obedience is a way to honor and reflect God's love. It is a beautiful transition sentence at the end of the Gospel. *Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.* When I was younger, I used to read this and reflect on it briefly. Jesus is getting older, and we don't know many of these years in between age 12 and he explodes on the ministry scene at age 30. So there are a lot of years here that are summarized here. *Increasing in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.* That phrase *in divine and human favor*, I used to think about that, that he was getting better. He was improving his skill set, he was in a place where people respected him more, and God shared even more extensive gifts.

At this point in my life I want to turn that totally around and say it this way. God will never love you more than right now. God loves you. We just heard the words *unconditional forgiveness*. Jesus' life and love for you, there will be no more increase in God's love. If you are searching for others to give you confidence by what they think of you, that's important for your family, but bluntly it will never be enough if you don't have that understanding of how well you are loved by God. I think the way I want to translate this for the resolutions is growing to love God more and growing to love people more. It's not a statement for Jesus that people and God looked at him differently, it's that he looked at the world differently. I hope the resolution for you and for me is as simple as this – I want to love God even more, and I want to love other people as myself. I want to grow in spiritual wisdom through loving God. Not because it is going to change his mind, but because my life can be opened even more and loving others.

Our youngest son is 23, which is a really great time to be alive. You have most of the answers, but there are a few gray areas starting to pop up. So Joe is just an utterly delightful young man, but he is starting to realize that sometimes bosses make judgment calls that maybe he doesn't agree with, neighbors act kind of goofy, all those different types of things. I said, "Joe, if I can just say this in the best way, have just a little bit of lightness at this thing we call the divine and human comedy." Lighten up just a little bit, it is a stressful life these days, he lives in a big city in the Dallas area, just lighten up a little bit.

That's sort of an underpinning here, because my New Year's resolutions were wonderfully goal oriented. They were resolutions. One of my friends said to this, "Yah, the way you do resolutions is like you are re-solving or re-solutions – they are the same ones year after year." Losing weight – Chuck noticed yesterday – I could lose 10 pounds, or 20, 30, 40 would be good. I think I have made this resolution for a long time. It is a simple matter of why would I want to do that. Of course it is for health, to be in better shape these years and be more active. But when you do it as a matter of the

will, which is not a bad place to be, but I just look at this Colossians text as just a beautiful summary of growing in grace with God, in favor with the Lord, and with people. Meaning loving God and loving others, and so loving ourselves.

Let's go through it – Colossians 3 – *As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved.* That is our starting position. God claims you, God wants you, God loves you. Holy meaning not perfect, but set apart for a purpose to bring God's love and character into the world. We start based upon this love. I think many resolutions don't start there, they start with an act of criticism. I just ask you – start with these faith resolutions, we start with that position. *Clothe or cover yourself with compassion and kindness, humility, meekness and patience.* These words throughout the years, are translated a little bit different in our culture, but compassion is such a beautiful word. It is a word that in Greek really describes that your guts are touched, or almost like when you see somebody in need, your guts open. It's not a head thing, it's not just a heart thing, it's deep within. This living of compassion, wouldn't it be great if some of us took that on as a New Year's resolution to live with increased compassion for God's people?

Kindness, this word is a simple word, but it's a powerful word. When people treat you with kindness, and we extend that to one another. I want to give a special shout out, maybe it's a small group of people here, but over my years of being pastor, often we are not that kind to ourselves. I am not saying to lower your standards and anything goes, I just mean to be kind to yourself. Why would you yell at yourself more than you would any other person? To be open to God's love for you, to be kind to others, and yourself.

Humility is a great word, it means common humanity, hummus, sort of coming out of the earth. It means earth, we are all together. I was working with a guy this past week, he was down and out on his luck, and I said, "We are in this together." He teared up, he said "I haven't heard that ever." I said, "Well, that's what we have to keep, is our common humanity, we are no better nor no worse than each other. Actions, yes, we have made mistakes, but we are on this journey together."

Meekness, that word doesn't translate well into American culture. It means you are not speaking up for yourself. No, it means that you are able to control your emotions and your actions. It means that external circumstances can't take you off your mark. Pastor Peggy Hall, a dear friend of mine, she said, "Pastor Lowell, you preach a good sermon, but I just want to know – what kind of driver are you?" Meaning, I can talk these good words but in a lot of ways your spiritual health and maturity is shown by how you drive, how do you respond, do you get enraged by others? I kind of just chuckle to myself. This meekness, being able to control what I do when I see other people driving in a particular way. I ask for their grace and mercy to me when I make my mistakes.

Patience, I just wanted to anchor again. Can you imagine being Jesus and having parents who are patient with you? This scene in Jerusalem could have ended horribly. A tremendous conflict, a tremendous disagreement. Yet with their patience, he was introduced in this human world, this gift of God.

My hope and prayer for you is that compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience would be your spiritual resolutions, your faith resolutions. You don't need to do all. Wouldn't it be an amazing church if we had some people working on compassion, some on kindness, humility, meekness, and we had this beautiful balanced effort to grow in patience and love. It continues – a final encouragement here – bear with one another and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Let's go back to a simple understanding that when God forgives you, it is complete and total. I think I have spoken about this, the confirmation girl who was away from faith and joined the church as an eighth grader. She heard that entire forgiveness of all of your sins. Afterwards she came up to me and said, "Is that all there is? Isn't there more, don't I have to do more?" I said, "No, this is God's incredible righteousness, this is God's 100% movement into your life, this is all it is." So as you find it difficult to forgive others, I ask you to go back to the starting position, to receive the love of God and gathering in our worship is to know, place your confidence, trust of God's entire forgiveness for you. The work and love of Jesus Christ. Clothe yourselves with love which binds everything together. Pastor Chuck had spoken about this during his sermon last week. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, be thankful, sing psalms, hymns, spiritual songs to God in whatever you do.

I want to chuckle with you at the end, so as I want to eat better nutrition, I was shocked, saddened, dismayed. Do you know how much sugar is in ketchup? I am just starting to read the labels, I think I let out a scream in the grocery store, it is ridiculous. You can buy better ketchup, and you can lower that amount. I was just thinking about applying to my life, and whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus. Pray for me. The next time I am in a store, I am going to attempt to have that mindset as I look at nutritional information on food. Because I used to look at it as punishment or I have to figure out a strategy. This beautiful phrase for you and I – this is the simplest and most profound resolution for the year – whatever we do in word and deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus. Giving thanks to God the Father through him. I know if I do that, my life will be fuller. I want to grow more in love for the Lord, and in love for you and for this community. I ask that your resolution be on this same train of thought. This is such a beautiful, practical, wonderful gift of scripture to help us shape our new year's resolutions and to be kind to others as you are kind to yourself. Let us pray.

Thank you God for the gift of your love and word. Thank you for the gift of this season where we understand that you have become one with humanity through the incarnation and I ask God for a simple and profound movement. Your resolve for us through Christ allows us to resolve for others. Help us to live with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience in everything we do. In the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to you God. Amen