

Soul Resolutions

December 31, 2023

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In the sermon I offered on Christmas Eve, I asked people to give a show of hands as to whether they thought I'd take the route of offering a comfy-cozy Christmas Eve sermon or the alternative route of offering something edgier. Since that went over so well, I thought I'd try it again!

How many of you have made New Year's resolutions in the past? How many have kept them?

New Year's resolutions, as a concept, are a mixed bag. On the one hand, there is something lovely about new beginnings, about starting fresh. On the other hand, New Year's resolutions seem so rule-based. They're so often about self-mastery and rarely about grace.

Tish Harrison Warren is an Episcopal priest who writes for the New York Times. In an article she wrote last year, she names my relationship with resolutions perfectly.

"I love the intentionality and thoughtfulness that are required to make a resolution. They force me to reflect on what I long for, what the good life might consist of and how to get there, which is a good exercise for all of us at any time.

On the other hand, I am lousy at discipline. So resolutions, to me, can feel ungracious, a yearly visit from a disgruntled drill sergeant, an occasion for needless guilt. This ambivalence springs from a tension I feel between the responsibility to actively seek self-improvement and the reality that, in the end, everything most lovely in life — from love to salvation to goodness to joy — comes as a gift. It is all a mercy. Even our ability to strive toward change is a gift, a grace and not exactly in our control, which is clear to anyone who has ever planned a productive day only to be sidelined by a head cold, a migraine, or a broken transmission."

I'd add to that tension between taking responsibility for making one's life better and living-in to grace the dynamic that I've encountered so many people for whom the last year, indeed several years, have been so full of burdens and grief, that adding the expectation that folks add one more brick to their crushing load just seems cruel. So, rather than approaching New Year's resolutions from a perspective of self-mastery and regimen, let's look at them as tools to be put into God's service as we strive for the new life the Gospels encourage us toward.

"The point is that renewal is always possible, and with a large dollop of grace we can freely try new things; we can continue to grow and change."

—Harrison Warren

With this as her paradigm, Harrison Warren invited spiritual leaders to suggest some "soul resolutions," that is, some resolutions to nourish and encourage our individual and collective soul, rather than ways to lose weight or get one's financial house in order. One of the spiritual leaders she heard from was Eboo Patel, the founder of Interfaith America, a Chicago-based non-

profit which seeks to encourage interfaith dialogue and understanding. Patel is an internationally known spiritual leader, and yet he talks about the fact that his morning routine is to reach for his phone and start scrolling, most often encountering things that make him mad or at least bring him down. The soul resolution that Patel lifts up is to start every day with spiritual reading, whether scripture or a devotional or really anything inspiring. What if 2024 is the year that you re-shape your morning routine, even cutting out 10 minutes of scrolling and replacing it with spiritual reading.

Similarly, Bonnie Kristian, a journalist and author of “Untrustworthy” and “A Flexible Faith” suggests that we narrow our news focus. There’s so much that goes on in the world that it is impossible to understand the complexities of it all. Kristian’s resolution is to choose a new story, or even two or three, to follow in depth.

“As a news consumer, resolve to know just a few stories and to know them well. Your time and attention are limited. You can’t do justice to every issue of the day, and maintaining a broad, shallow pattern of news consumption makes you vulnerable to manipulation and confusion. So this year, pick a story or two to follow carefully and in depth. Read books, not just the latest headlines. Learn key names and legislation. Find trustworthy journalists to keep you up-to-date. Then remember your finitude and ignore everything else.”

The resolution Karina Yan Glaser, a children’s book author and illustrator, shared was that she was going to write and mail one physical letter every week. With so much of our communication being electronic today, writing and receiving a physical letter is such a treat. Writing not only communicates our care, it also draws our attention away from ourselves and toward others.

Rev. Michelle Sanchez, author of “Color-Courageous Discipleship” and “God’s Beloved Community” says that her resolution is to confront her sorrow. She writes:

“I love how “courage” derives from the Latin word for “heart.” In the coming year, I want to courageously acknowledge specific ways in which my heart has been broken — by people, by racism, by institutions and even by God — so that I can pursue the healing I need. If we want to be agents of healing to our hurting world, we must courageously and continuously pursue the healing of our own hearts.”

There are just two more resolutions that I’ll share with you. Nii Addy, a neuroscientist and associate professor of psychiatry at Yale University points to an experience I think is common to many of us. She says that in trying to create a work-life balance, she invariably ends up frustrated, anxious, and irritable. She says that, instead of feeling guilty about neglecting work when focusing on family and also feeling guilty about neglecting family when focusing on work, she’s going to acknowledge that “balance is a false construct of a task-based world,” and instead invite grace in when those feelings of guilt start to bubble up.

The last New Year’s soul resolution from a spiritual leader that I’ll lift up is from Pastor Rich Villodas. He writes about how, as a pastor, he and his family have cultivated the concept of

keeping sabbath, which he describes as taking time to stop, rest, and delight. THAT in and of itself is a worthy resolution if it isn't part of your life right now. Villodas' resolution last year was to take that concept of sabbath keeping and expand it to intentionally gathering, feasting, and resting with others. (I'm seeing so much lately about how one of the psycho-spiritual results of the pandemic is that people have really forgotten how to be together. A resolution to gather, feast, and rest with others may be one small way to address that phenomenon.)

The Scriptures and Conclusion

One of the things I LOVE about this list of resolutions is that they're not things that one can fail at. They're not the kind of thing that, if you miss a day or a week you can't get right back on the wagon. Our Call to Worship today was based on that wise passage from Ecclesiastes which reminds us that there is a time for everything — a time to be born and a time to die, a time to reap and a time to sow.

Our Gospel is a familiar one to many of us, the passage that tells of the shepherds seeking out the newborn Jesus. Like the passage from Ecclesiastes which says that there's a time for everything, one thing I love about this passage about the shepherds is that it offers two modes of living with a profound experience. On the one hand, the shepherds go tell everyone, while on the other, Mary "contemplates all of these things in her heart." Neither is better.

As we step into this New Year, my prayer for all of us is that we will intentionally and gracefully resolve to take on practices that will nourish our souls, individually and collectively. May our resolutions lead us to healing, wholeness, and health in the New Year. Alleluia and Amen.

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Psalm 8, Luke 2:15-21
December 31, 2023