



Liturgical Day: The Second Sunday of Christmas (The Tenth Day of Christmas)

Date: January 3, 2010

Sermon Title: A New Year's Resolution

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Happy New Year, everybody. I hope you are all enjoying the Christmas season, and have had a nice break from the regular routine of life. My family and I had a nice break this past week – the chance to spend six days in the Phoenix area. It was a wonderfully relaxing time – just what we needed after a busy Christmas week. We came home late yesterday evening – a bit fatigued from a twelve-hour car ride, but still rested and renewed and thankful for the opportunity to get away and have some family time. Now I'm glad to be back with you, and I am excited to be here at the beginning of another new year.

I love new beginnings: baptisms and births and all the new beginnings of family life; the beginning of summer; the beginning of vacations; the beginning of a new school year; the beginning of a new church year. Each one offers such hope and possibility. There is something encouraging about having a new start. Maybe that is what fuels all of our society's commemorations at the beginning of each new year. Many of us celebrate the New Year with "New Year's Resolutions" – how many of you have done that this year? It is interesting to note how we do this year after year after year, yet few of our resolutions seem to last very long.

I once spoke with the manager of a sport club, and she said that January was always their busiest month. But by February, many of those enthusiastic participants will have given up on their efforts to get or stay in shape, and it was all of a sudden easier for the rest of her clients to get to the exercise machines. Many of us have experienced the same short shelf life of New Year's Resolutions, but still we make our resolutions, don't we? Perhaps it is the thought of starting over – and the hope that the next year will bring a richer, more meaningful experience of life than did the previous one – that fuels our New Year's celebrations.

That's why January is always a good time to read the first chapter of St. John's Gospel. Every year, on the first Sunday of the year, we turn our attention to the opening words of John's Gospel.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him... [1:1-3a]

John reminds us of this very first beginning, and then tells us Jesus, *The Word Made Flesh*, is God's decision to begin again. Those who walked through the Bible in 90 days with us this past Fall saw first-hand the evidence that God is a God of new beginnings. In the book of Genesis, God begins anew with all of creation. In the book of Exodus, God begins anew with the people Israel, leading them out of their slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land. In the books of Kings and Chronicles, God begins anew with Kings Saul and David and Solomon, as Israel becomes a mighty nation. In the prophets, God begins anew by calling a sinful people back to faith, and promising to guard and keep them if they obey once again. And in the New Testament, God begins anew by forgiving and renewing all who believe in the saving power of Jesus Christ.

St. John makes this last new beginning a central purpose of his book, and tells us so in this

LESSONS

JEREMIAH 31:7-14

OR SIRACH 24:1-12

PSALM 147:12-20

OR WISDOM OF SOLOMON
10:15-21

EPHESIANS 1:3-14

ST. JOHN 1: [1-9] 10-18

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

ALMIGHTY GOD, YOU
HAVE FILLED ALL THE EARTH
WITH THE LIGHT OF YOUR
INCARNATE WORD. BY
YOUR GRACE EMPOWER US
TO REFLECT YOUR LIGHT IN
ALL THAT WE DO,
THROUGH JESUS CHRIST,
OUR SAVIOR AND LORD,
WHO LIVES AND REIGNS
WITH YOU AND THE HOLY
SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND
FOREVER. AMEN.

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God's work. Our hands.

morning's lesson:

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. [1:12-13]

John has recorded the story of our Lord's life so that his readers might come to believe that Jesus is the Christ. His purpose is not to entertain them, or to arouse their curiosity about a man who lived many years ago. His purpose is to help them experience Christ in faith; to give them the power to become the children of God. John wishes for them to know how God delights in making a new beginning with each of them: as they receive the gift of forgiveness and the hope of eternal life, and begin to live as disciples of the One who loved us enough to give life itself for us.

This is the primary movement of the Christian faith. Our God is one who invites us to return and begin anew. In the promise of our baptism, we are invited to leave behind our failures and disappointments, and start all over again. That is why the very first thing we did as a congregation in 2010 was to join our hearts and minds in confession and forgiveness. Every time we do that, God seeks to make a new beginning with us.

Repentance is what the life of faith is all about – and what the Gospel of John is all about. And by that, I don't mean remorse. Some hear the word repentance and think remorse: feeling badly about what we've done and begging God for forgiveness. That is part of repentance, but there is much more. Repentance has to do with receiving a whole new mind. Repentance has to do with turning in an entirely new direction. Repentance has to do with experiencing a new beginning with God.

With repentance in mind, I want to invite you to make a new year's resolution with me. This is an annual invitation I like to offer at the beginning of every year. This resolution is a different kind of resolution though: not one that is dependent on our ability to keep a promise, but one that is dependent on God's ability to keep a promise. Not one that is dependent on our individual resolve, but one that is dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit. I want to invite you to commit yourselves to the mission we believe God has entrusted to us at Saint Peter.

Our Mission Statement at Saint Peter is divided into two parts. In the first part, we declare that, "We are welcomed into God's love, just as we are." That is a key piece of what it means to be a Christian. In Jesus, we are put right with God. And by Jesus, we are commanded to welcome others into that experience of love. That's one of the reasons that you'll find me in the driveway, out at the street, before most services. It is a reminder to myself, and to all of us, of our responsibility to welcome others. Hopefully, you'll usually find our hosts extending their welcome as well, by standing out at the parking lot, and welcoming you to worship. That is one of the things that Saint Peter has traditionally been fairly good at. We tend to notice newcomers. We tend to offer them a warm welcome. This year, what if every single one of us committed ourselves to that? What if we made sure that no guest ever makes it into our worship center without being warmly welcomed by a half dozen of us? And what if we committed ourselves to reaching out to newcomers first, after worship? Not connecting with our own friends right away, but waiting to do that until we've made sure that everyone feels welcomed and at home here? And we need to remember that this part of our mission statement does not just speak of welcoming people into Saint Peter. It has to do with welcoming others into God's love – a responsibility that we have not just on Sunday mornings, but every day of the week.

In the second part of our Mission Statement, we declare that "We are sent into God's world, to be a reflection of Christ's love." I am always awed by how many Saint Peter members and friends take this seriously. There are so many service projects that find strong support here: from our youth Mission Trips, to Pack-to-School, to Adopt-a-Family, to Covenant Cupboard, and at least a dozen others. And over the years there has been strong, continual support of our ministry partners at Selian Hospital, and Habitat for Humanity, and Lutheran Family Services. There are so many here who take this seriously, and get so much out of it. What if we determined that in 2010 every member and every friend of Saint Peter would be involved in some act of community service every month? It would be a great way to respond to the way we have been welcomed into God's love.

This morning I invite you to make a New Year's Resolution to grow in these areas of your faith lives – in these areas of mission. I do so, confident that as we become more and more a people who see ourselves as welcomed and sent, we will become more and more capable of welcoming others into our community – into our faith – and responding with them to God's command that we go out into the world as a reflection of Christ's love.

There are so many ways that God makes new beginnings in our lives. And there are so many opportunities for us to respond to this grace of God. Every moment of every day offers each of us an opportunity to be faithful to God. May the beginning of this New Year be a new beginning in your life. And as you consider the role God is calling you to play in your world, may your faithfulness increase, may the light of Christ be known through your words and deeds, and from its fullness, may we all receive grace upon grace. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor

English Text: ⁱ

[^{1:1} In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.]

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. ⁱⁱ

Greek Text:

[^{1:1} Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. ² οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. ³ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν. ὁ γέγονεν ⁴ ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων. ⁵ καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν. ⁶ Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος, ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης. ⁷ οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ. ⁸ οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός. ⁹ Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον.]

¹⁰ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω. ¹¹ εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον. ¹² ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, ¹³ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν. ¹⁴ Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας. ¹⁵ Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ κέκραγεν λέγων· οὗτος ἦν ὃν εἶπον· ὁ ὀπίσω μου

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/worship/church_year.

ⁱⁱ St. John 1: [1-9] 10-14, *New Revised Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ἐρχόμενος ἔμπροσθεν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι πρῶτος μου ἦν. ¹⁶ ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ πληρώματος αὐτοῦ ἡμεῖς πάντες ἐλάβομεν καὶ χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος. ¹⁷ ὅτι ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωϋσέως ἐδόθη, ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο. ¹⁸ Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε· μονογενὴς θεὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱⁱ St. John 1:[1-9] 10-14, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).