



“Resolutions of Salvation & Praise”

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First Sunday after Christmas

For several weeks we were in the waiting place, the season of Advent, anticipating Christmas. Then Christmas finally came, and found us spending time once again with family and friends. We exchanged gifts and celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ.

Now with Christmas behind us and the New Year before us, most, if not all, of us are making or have made some kind of New Year’s Resolution. The most popular ones include exercising, eating better, taking time out to relax and travel to places we have dreamed for years to see.

It’s a laundry list of promises and a set of goals we are often challenged to keep. I make my list every year, and one of mine includes running at least three times a week around Prospect Park at the beginning of spring. I always start out doing as I say I will, and by the end of spring, I’m down to once a week; by the end of the summer, I’m hardly running at all.

New commitments replace old ones, and we find ourselves each year making commitments to do things differently or repeat those resolutions we were not able to live up to last year.

Our resolutions are not a departure from the past but works in progress that always seem to be experienced as a “new thing;” promises that we hope we can fulfill in the present and the future.

Just as we have resolutions for our lives, so does God. God has established a promise that is not by any stretch of the word a challenge for God to keep. God’s promise is salvation through Jesus Christ which is a fulfillment of, and not a departure from, God’s work in the past.

Hundreds of years before Jesus Christ became God Incarnate in human form, delivered of Mary and Joseph in a manger in the town of Bethlehem; before Jesus was presented to God in the temple court of Jerusalem and began to wax in spirit; before the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus to preach the Kingdom of God; and before Jesus was crucified and rose on the Third Day, a prophet named Isaiah preached the Good News of salvation; prophesying that it would come through a Servant of the Lord, which Christianity has always understood to be Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

In the days of Isaiah, ancient Judah and Jerusalem were in a crisis of politics and faith. They were cities conquered by the Babylonian Empire. It was a devastating time in the lives of the Jewish people.

I can imagine the people of those cities filled with grave despair, their minds full of doubt concerning their status as God’s chosen people. I can envision them asking, “how in the

world could this have happened? Does God really exist, and if so, will God deliver us from this horror?”

It is this community, some of whom were exiled from their homeland in Babylon; a people who began to lose faith in what appeared to be a hopeless situation, to whom the Prophet Isaiah spoke about salvation; salvation meaning victory, liberation from captivity, and rescue from oppression. Isaiah preached to the people that only one God existed. This God, Isaiah said, created the world and brings redemption. It was a message Isaiah pleaded with Israel to rest on.

The only way Israel will see and experience deliverance from Babylon, Isaiah said, is if Israel trusts that God will deliver them. It is this deliverance, this saving work, that the entire world has also been invited to experience through the Servant of the Lord, and as Isaiah said, this deliverance evokes rejoicing and praise to God.

We find in our Old Testament Lesson [Isaiah 61:10-62:3], a hymn of praise and thanksgiving foreshadowing the restoration of Judah and Jerusalem. It is a prophetic word that deliverance will come.

The hymnist is saying in the text, “when I am rescued by experiencing the salvation of the Lord” [where God is no longer silent about Israel’s situation but vindicating the nation, giving it a new identity and status, that will burn as bright for all the world to see] “I am going to rejoice in God with every part of my being.”

The robe of righteousness, which is God’s faithfulness, is going to cover me, as if I am decked with garlands and adorned with jewels. What an incredible metaphor of God’s promised ‘salvation’ for Israel, Israel’s hope in that promise and Israel’s resolution to ‘praise’ God in the victory.

Centuries later, the Servant of the Lord prophesied by Isaiah and known to us as Jesus, is in Jerusalem. According to our New Testament Lesson [Luke 2:22-40], Jesus’ parents Mary and Joseph are at the temple court to purify themselves, to circumcise Jesus, and to dedicate Him to God, as Jewish law and tradition required.

But while they were in the temple court, they encountered two old people who were devoted to God: a man named Simeon who was promised by God, as revealed by the Holy Spirit, that he would not die until he saw the Messiah; and a 84-year-old widow and prophetess named Anna, who hung out in the temple fasting, praying, and worshipping God practically 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. What a call Anna had on her life!

I am sure Simeon and Anna had seen hundreds of children presented to God in the temple court. But for some reason they were fixed on this child. While many may have thought the baby was just another Jewish child born under Roman oppression, Simeon and Anna knew there was something different, something extraordinary about this baby. They saw Jesus through eyes of faith and therefore, understood by the Spirit of the living God that this child was the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

I wonder if Simeon and Anna imagined the Messiah would come in their lifetimes. But if they did imagine it, after hearing the scriptures read over the years in the temple court about the coming of the Servant of the Lord as proclaimed by the Prophet Isaiah, they probably thought the Messiah would appear as an adult descending from the clouds.

But Simeon whose name means ‘heard’, was so convinced in his spirit that the child before him was the one, that he took Jesus into his arms and gave praise to God. “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

Then Anna, which means ‘grace’, joined with Simeon in a symphony of praise to God and spoke about Jesus to everyone who was looking for Jerusalem to be redeemed from the

oppression of Rome; a message Anna may have also directed to other people in and around the temple that wondered what Simeon and Anna's praise was really all about.

It may have appeared the birth of Jesus was God doing something new, but what God did was not new. Hope is always joined to memory, and the new is God's keeping of an old promise; the promise of salvation through Jesus that would not just be for Israel, but for the world.

It is a world you and I are a part of, where our faith, like ancient Israel, is being tested even now in the face of hard economic and political times. We may be confronting problems in our personal lives, in our home, or be challenged in our health. Whatever we are going through, even at this very moment, we need to remember, right now and as we enter 2009, God's resolution for our life is salvation through Jesus Christ. It is a promise of love and grace God is fulfilling each day of our lives, even when it doesn't feel like it's happening. We receive this love and saving grace by faith.

Our resolution is to praise God. Not just in this coming New Year, not just on Sundays, but every day of our waking lives, as we renew our strength in the joy of the Lord and stay open to the movement of the Holy Spirit; as Simeon, Anna, and the hymnist in our Isaiah text did.

Praise is not just a ritual, and it's not something we create. It is a deposit God makes deep down in the core of our being that is an expression of our faith. It includes the purity of our hearts and sincerity in our love of God and neighbor. It springs up from the inside, recognizing the sacredness of life and the presence of God, especially when we need it the most.

There is no doubt this year will be filled with endless opportunities as well as great trials. We are going to face some highs and lows. But in all things, not just some things, we are to praise God who is faithful, just, and righteous, and has saved us through the birth, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

When we do this, we participate with God as God breaks into our world of challenges and suffering; and we respond to the work of salvation that God has been doing since the beginning of time.

Amen.

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