

The Word

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
January 1, 2017

First Sunday after Christmas (Year A)

John 1:1-14



I made a New Year's resolution this year. My resolution is to make no resolutions. Why engage in the whole charade, anyway? Some years I've joined the larger crowds at the gym, crowds which are considerably thinner on January 31 than they were on January 1. I've gone on the diets which come with a variety of names but at root, at least to me, have one theme: If it tastes good, spit it out. One year I resolved to meditate every day for thirty minutes. Even got an app for that. Five minutes in on January 3 I think it was I reduced the time to ten minutes. A few days later it was down to five minutes and a week or so in I was just too busy.

So I resolve to make no resolutions.

There's a problem for Christians with this whole resolution dance we do every year. It's right there in the pronouns. "I." I will do this and I will do that, as if by sheer will, all on our own, we can change, we can resolve.

And yet the one thing we learn at Christmas is that change, real and lasting, comes to us only by the power of God, more specifically God at work in the world through the Word.

In the beginning, John says, was the Word. Before the universe, before you and me and all our plans, before the first breath, there was the Word. The Word was how God spoke everything into existence, the Word *was* God. John doesn't have shepherds like Luke, or Matthew's Magi. No, John wants us to remember that all of that, and all of us, have our beginning, our life and light, in the Word.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and we beheld his glory. The Word took on skin. The Word ate and drank. The Word laughed and wept. The Word suffered and bled and died. The Word was with us in every way, and in the Word we are given a way to live in the world that is true life and light.

We did not, on our own, do any of this. By locating the beginning in the heart of God, John reminds us on this New Year's Day that all our years are gifts and that our lives are lived best when lived in this knowledge.

Those of you who came on the session in the last few years will remember from the book we studied the painting of the crucifixion by Matthias Grunwald that makes up the Isenheim altarpiece, a print of which hung in theologian Karl Barth's study right above his desk. It is a painting depicting Christ on the cross, with John the Baptist standing off to the side, pointing to Christ. He himself was not the light, but he testified, he gave witness, to the light. This, Barth believed, was the calling of all theologians - all Christian disciples - to point away from ourselves, to point to Christ, to the light.

We always talk about this as the elders prepare to answer ordination questions. You've heard them many times, and you will hear them again next week. The answers elders are to give are in the form of "I will, with God's help." One year, an elder told me she had taken to answering many of the questions and tasks that come her way with that simple phrase, "with God's help."

Will you be a caring and loving spouse - "I will, with God's help."

Will you be a committed and responsible parent - "I will, with God's help."

Will you be a diligent student - "I will, with God's help."

Will you care for yourself, body, mind, and soul - "I will, with God's help."

Will you be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ - "I will, with God's help."

When you think about it, that's the only way any of us do anything at all - with God's help. To live with this awareness, surely this is true life, a life that brings humility, values community, a life that points away from itself toward the Word, life as a witness. We could do worse than to write it on the bathroom mirror, above the door as we leave our homes and as we enter, in our places of work, close to our hearts - "I will, with God's help."

A few moments ago I made a statement about the various diets I have done. I said, "If it tastes good, spit it out." Kim really hates it when I say that. As I was writing this sermon and typing out that phrase, I had to stop and consider why she hates it. She is one of the few people I know who I can say made a resolution and stuck with it. Many of you remember when she had some health issues going on six years ago now. It was clear from the issues that there were two paths she could take: a lifetime of medications or a lifestyle change. I remember sitting with her in the hospital room and hearing her say, "I'm not going to stay on medicine. I'm making some changes."

Someone in the church recommended a book by Dr. Dean Ornish. He made the radical claim that through his four-step formula not only could you halt the progression of heart disease, but reverse it. I looked at the first part – “What you eat,” and thought to myself, “There’s no way.” Eliminate meat, butter, sweets, fried foods...everything that we were eating. There were three other parts as well. The second was, “How much you move,” and the third, “How you manage stress.” But it was the fourth lifestyle element, as he calls it, that Kim says was the key to making the others possible – a community of love and support.

Kim did it. She made every change and came off all the medications. Her cardiologist said she was the poster child for the power of lifestyle change to completely transform health.

Kim will tell you that the key to her success was that it wasn’t her success, that without a sense of love and support from family and friends, and without a strong faith, it would not have been possible.

This is something anyone who is for instance in Twelve Steps will tell you. “We realized we were powerless...and we turned to a higher power.”

“I will, with God’s help.”

“Notice how John shifts attention from Christ’s birth to ours, from his significance to the significance he gives to us. ‘He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 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

By joining John the Baptist in pointing away from ourselves to Christ, we discover the fundamental truth about ourselves, that we are beloved children of God.

It is easy, especially on New Year’s Day, to define ourselves by what we are not. Our list of resolutions can emerge from a place of self-doubt and insecurity and a sense of failure. Hiding beneath most resolutions is the sense that I am not enough, that if I can somehow lose twenty pounds, get that promotion, make an “A” in that class, get to the gym every day, or whatever it is, *then* I will be worthy of love, respect, of being called a child of God.

¹ Lose, David. *An Unsentimental Christmas Sermon*. December 30, 2013. [Working Preacher](#).

John today invites us to a different kind of resolution, a more fundamental transformation. He invites us to simply receive the gift of this day, this new year, as a gift from the hand of a God who became flesh, became one with us, in order that we might know ourselves beloved, of supreme value, just as we are. When we begin there, seeing ourselves the way God sees us, when all our resolutions spring from that place of peace and light, true transformation begins.

I resolved I wasn't making any resolutions, and, true to form, here at ?? on January 1, I am breaking my resolution. I do resolve, and I invite you to join me, in each day taking the posture of John the Baptist. The Word is at work in the world. Let us each day look for the light, and when we see it, point it out, in others, and in ourselves. Let us resolve to see ourselves the way God sees us, to see others the way God sees them, to see the world the way the God who became flesh and dwelt among us sees it.

Let us resolve it, here and now. I will, we will, with God's help. Amen.