

"FACING THE TRUTH"

A Sermon for New Year's Eve, December 31, 2017

Readings from ILCW lectionary, ca. 1971 (Jeremiah 24:1-10; Romans 89:31b-39; Luke 13:6-9)

Then Jesus told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" (Luke 13:6-9)

"Sir, let it alone for one more year."

According to one recent list, the top ten new year's resolutions are these:

1. Stay fit and healthy
2. Lose weight
3. Enjoy life to the fullest
4. Spend less, save more
5. Spend more time with family and friends
6. Get organized
7. Do not make resolutions
8. Learn something new/get a new hobby
9. Travel more
10. Read more

I am not going to make fun of those resolutions. They are all good as far as they go, although I am disappointed to note the absence from that list of "Be more generous," "Be more patient," "Listen better," etc.

Here's an excellent list in the dismissal we use at our 7:30 service:

1. Serve God with gladness.
2. Be of good courage.
3. Hold fast to that which is good.
4. Render to no one evil for evil.

5. Strengthen the fainthearted.
6. Support the weak.
7. Help the afflicted.
8. Honor all people.
9. Love and serve God.
10. Rejoice in the power of the Holy spirit.

Why are people more likely to resolve to "read more" than to "honor all people"? Is something wrong with our thinking? I heard someone on the radio lump all resolutions together under the heading "Take care of yourself." Why don't we think more "Take care of others"?

But this is a Lutheran church and I am a Lutheran preacher, so I'm not going to tell you what to resolve. I leave that up to you, in your Christian freedom. Face the truth about yourself, and then make your list.

What I want to talk about is not your resolutions, but God's.

God's resolutions, like yours and mine, have to do with both the past and the future. (In Germany this day is called "Altjahrsabend" or "The evening of the old year.") Although our resolutions are for the coming year, they arise out of judgments on our past. What we have done wrong, we will do right. Looking back, we are not proud. Therefore, we resolve to be better. (It seems no one is blind enough to their faults that they resolve to repeat last year.)

God makes resolutions in all our readings today, and those resolutions are worth listening to. In Jeremiah, God takes a look at the people he had sent into exile, who have suffered for many years. God resolves "to

regard as good” the exiles from Judah, whom he had sent away from Judea to the land of the Chaldeans. “I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down.” Etc.

Then, God looks at the people who didn’t have to go into exile but got to stay in their homeland, the remnant. God judges them to be like figs so bad that they cannot be eaten, and he resolves “I will make them a horror, an evil thing . . . a disgrace, a byword, a taunt, and a curse.” God’s resolution is a terrible judgment upon them.

God looks back; God resolves what to do, going forward.

But in Luke we have another story altogether. God resolves to destroy a tree which does not bear fruit. But an intermediary intercedes on behalf of the tree and begs the owner of the vineyard to spare the useless fig tree, even though it deserves to be cut down so it doesn’t waste space. God’s resolution to destroy is interrupted by an appeal for forgiveness. When the gardener says “Let it alone for one more year,” he uses the verb which means to forgive! That is the verb from the Lord’s Prayer! “Let our sins go” or “Let go of our sins.”

That gardener? Who do you think it is, who intercedes on our behalf, asking God to let us alone for another year? Any ideas?

So the “resolution” in Luke, is like a “stay” of resolution. We have sinned. We face the truth about that. But, we pray, let us live! Let us be taken care of a while longer! Allow us, by your Holy Spirit, to “confess our sins, receive your forgiveness, and grow into the fullness of Jesus Christ our Lord.”

In Romans 8, it becomes clear that the “non-resolution” of Luke 13 is actually a resolution of love. God is resolved—to love us and never let us go.

The faith of Christians is that, while the universe itself may be indifferent to our fate (!), the God who

created the universe is not. God’s will for us is life and light and love and peace and joy. And that will gets executed through his Word, his Son Jesus Christ, in whose face we purport to see a perfect reflection of the will of God the creator.

The month of January, as you know, is named after the Roman god Janus, who had two faces—one looking back and one looking forward. We also look both directions at the end of the year, but what we see when we look back is the love of God, and what we see when we look forward is the love of God. Alpha and Omega, the same yesterday, today, and forever. Constant in love. Resolute in mercy. We assert with Paul that “Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Make resolutions if you want to. Face the truth about yourself: what you do wrong, what you should do better, and so on. But do it all within the broader context of a truth that is not about you but is about the God who has made us his children. Make resolutions knowing that your success at keeping them is not what will save you or the world; and that your failure at keeping them will not separate you from God’s love. “It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?”

Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus once and reminded them that they had been, at one time in the past, “without God in the world.” That is a cold place to be. On what can we rely, then, for the year to come? What is our hope, if we are without God in the world? Is everything up to us? Is it all a gigantic self-improvement project? Or, if we are fine the way we are, is it up to us to improve the other people? The Romans suffered hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword. Our fears are a little different, but the year ahead does not look bright, if we are “without God in the world.”

Let us face the truth, then. But not only the truth about ourselves. Or the truth about others, which is so much worse. Let us face the truth about God—

that he has intervened in Christ to shine in our hearts and give us light so that we can share his peace, his goodness, his joy with all the people who have to deal with us in the year ahead.

Amen.

