

“On Making Resolutions”

A Sermonette for the Secular New Year, 2006

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Dear Friends,

Had we been born about 2000 years ago, we might well have found ourselves living as Jews within the Roman Empire. And had we been Roman Jews, surely we would have been aware that among our neighbors' gods, there was one by the name of Janus.

The Romans believed that Janus was the god who opened up the mighty door of the heavens to let the day come in and, who, at sunset, would then close the portals as the day passed through. Janus was the god who watched over all beginnings and all endings.

This is the month of Janus – we know it, of course, as January. Our secular New Year is but six days old, and if I operated my pocket calculator correctly, that means that there are 8,760 hours in the course of the year – subtract six days or 144 hours – and that leaves us with 8,616 hours left in 2006!

In this post-Katrina world we know that no one controls their destiny, so perhaps the only controllable difference, from one person to another, in terms of this New Year will be what we shall individually resolve to do with those 8,616 hours. How are we going to view them? What resolutions have you made for 2006 and how are doing so far?

I've always loved the story of the two fellows sent out into the remote mountains of the Ozarks to sell shoes. Almost immediately, one of the salesmen sent a telegram back to his home office, saying "Am returning at once. Can't sell shoes here. Everyone goes barefoot."

But, no word came from the other salesman. Days went by, and then a letter arrived at the home office. It was a bulky package with a note saying, "Fifty orders enclosed. Prospects unlimited. Nobody here has shoes!"

You get the idea – same situation, different interpretation; same amount of time given to each of us; same world in which we all live; and the same people with whom to work, but different results emerge from each of us.

The Wall Street Journal had a cartoon in it not long ago. It depicts a minister standing in the pulpit telling his congregation:

Each one of us is responsible for managing our own portfolios in this life's uncertain market.

Well, it certainly is an "uncertain market," this life of ours. And in my experience, perhaps no one has ever made this point more vividly than a friend of ours up in Pittsburgh. Long ago, he told me this true story, saying,

It happened when we were brand new parents, well over 40 years ago now. Our first born was still in diapers. Jan had taken the baby to a doctor's appointment, riding with a friend who drove them into Cincinnati, some 20 miles from the suburb

where we then lived. While they were in the doctor's waiting room, Jan found herself presented with a mess diaper. Now this was in the days before disposable diapers, so after Jan had changed it, her friend suggested she just fold up the diaper, take it out to the car in the parking lot, stick it under the front seat, and just deal with it later after she got back home.

Afterwards, when they were back home, as her friend drove into our driveway, Jan reached under the seat to retrieve the dirty diaper. But, it wasn't there. She had put it, you see, under the front seat of the wrong car!

My friend drew this inference, concluding his story with these words:

Yes, real life is often mess, chaotic, and sometimes full of stinking surprises!

How well we know, don't we? Surely, dear friends, regardless of life's surprises (stinking or otherwise), it is our challenge in this new year to take hold of those hours that we are given and to attempt to build something lasting and worthy from them. Perhaps that is simply God's own assignment to you and to me.

In the Torah, we are reading now about Joseph! He knew a thing or two about the ups and downs of life. But, when finally reunited with those very same brothers who betrayed him and sold him into slavery, which was tantamount to certain death, do you remember his attitude? Vengeance? Bitterness? Anger and fury? Did he call a lawyer and sue them? Did he buy a gun and shoot them?

No, he called them forward. He cleared everyone else out of the room and said, "I am Joseph, your brother, is my father still well?"

He said, don't be afraid. I'm not angry. Yes, you sold me here, but it was God who sent me ahead of you to save life in a great deliverance! So, go home and bring Daddy back down here – and do not delay!

What, then, are we willing to resolve to do to make this new year something worthy? So, for your in-the-pew pleasure, here is a seven-point "self-help sermon list" of new year's resolutions. All of them are yours for the doing!

1. Resolve to know when it's your move; your turn to act, to take charge, to initiate a change of policy, belief, attitude, lifestyle, or whatever. Know when it's up to you not only to do it, but to begin it – when to play and when to fold, when to move and when to stay.

2. Understand that yesterday was experience and tomorrow is hope. Resolve today to get from one to the other as best you can with kindness and integrity.
3. Make a resolution to be very careful that today's victories do not carry seeds of tomorrow's defeats. Ethics, morals, and values are critical. Some day, folks will gather around an open grave and summarize what you've stood for and your essence.
4. Resolve to keep an open mind. Discuss more and argue less. Learn to disagree agreeably! Listen to what people say, if they are caring and want to give you the gift of the best of their thinking.
5. Resolve not to gossip, however delicious it may seem. Gossip is destructive. So, guard your tongue and say less than you're thinking.
6. Resolve to face your fears squarely, for daylight often dissolves demons.
7. Pay no need to ill-natured remarks about yourself and live so that no one would believe them anyway.

In that final analysis, I've come to believe that life is going to prove to be just what each one of us decides to make of it. What we have lost of a material nature will not tell the tale of who and what we really are in the course of our lives. Attitude, faith, character, dignity, whom we befriend and whom we hurt, our loves, and our devotions – these will define us. There are going to be 8,616 hours in your new year – and that's no more and no less than anyone else is going to be given. It will be filled with all sorts of lifetime “building materials” – jobs and assignments; friends and family; surprises – good and bad; interruptions and opportunities. The one indisputable fact is that we are going to build something with all of this – and one year from now, we will be living in that which we have built.

And poet Robert Sharpe puts this challenge so exquisitely in these well renowned words:

Isn't it strange that princes and kings
and clowns that caper in sawdust rings,
And common people like you and me are
builders for eternity?
Each is given a bag of tools,
A shapeless mass; a book of rules,
And each must make, ere life is flown,
A stumbling block or a stepping stone.

Which will it be for you in this New Year?

Amen