

January 1, 2017 - *Our Spiritual Resolutions*

How many of you stayed up last night to see in the new year? Remember the old saying, “An optimist stays up until midnight to see the new year in. A pessimist stays up to make sure the old year leaves.” Perhaps that’s why our year begins with the month of January, named after the Roman god Janus, an appropriate personification of the start of the new year. As you can see, he has two faces, looking in opposite directions, so he can look both ahead toward the future and back at the past at the same time. And as we bid farewell to an old year and anticipate a new one, we are all a little like Janus. We think back on what we did right, and what we did wrong, and what should be changed. So that we can be and do better in the coming year.

That’s why we often make New Year’s resolutions. Perhaps you made one or two already. And, just think, if one of your resolutions was to attend church more often – well, guess what – you’ve been to church every Sunday this year! Has anyone here not eaten a donut this morning? Then you’ve stuck to a healthy diet this whole year so far. Have you, or do you have plans to exercise today? Well, then you’ll have exercised every single day this year. Yes, in the year 2017, hopefully you’ve not gotten angry at anyone, you’ve not overspent your budget, you’ve stayed organized, you’ve not thrown your clothes on the floor, not forgotten to floss, not been late for work, and you’ve taken time to say your prayers. As of right now, this year is a perfect reflection of your best self.

But the day isn’t over. And as the days go on, I imagine junk food may be on the menu again sometime, your exercise program will get pushed back another day, you’ll become frustrated enough to let loose some colorful words or have unholy thoughts, andwell you know where this is going. Yes, most resolutions are easily made and quickly dismissed. Because the problem with most of our resolutions is that we only try to make physical or cosmetic changes in our lives, when what we ought to do is resolve to make fundamental, spiritual changes that get to the heart of what kind of person we are. Because it is the deep, inner changes we make that will most affect our lives. And so perhaps our resolutions should include being more sacrificial, more generous, more involved, more disciplined. As we head into a new year, the ultimate resolution that you and I as a Christian can make is to live as a deeper, stronger, more faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. That’s why St. Paul once said, “Examine yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Test yourselves.” And these words are important to us today because they challenge us to have our own “epiphany” about our lives. He goes on to say, “Don’t you

understand that Jesus Christ is in you? Unless, of course, you fail the test.” And of course, I don’t think any of us want to fail the test. And so today, this first day of a new year, we will re-examine our lives. We’ll look back, and we’ll look forward. And we will make our spiritual resolutions.

It was tradition, particularly, during the eighteenth century, for Christians to hold a covenant renewal service together. Now a covenant is an agreement between two parties, each promising to uphold mutual responsibilities. And from the beginning, God has dealt with humankind through covenants. The Abrahamic Covenant, which began the Israelite nation – those who believed in the One True God. The Mosaic covenant, which established the Ten Commandments, the laws by which we should live. The Davidic Covenant, the assurance that the Messiah would come from the lineage of David and save people from their sins. And most importantly for us Christians, the New Covenant. At the Last Supper, Jesus said, “This is my blood of the New Covenant.” The New Covenant where God comes to us in Jesus Christ to transform our hearts and lives into the image of Christ, and to assure us the forgiveness of our sins, and life everlasting. God coming to us to transform us. That is God’s part of the Covenant. And our part of this New Covenant is to follow Christ. To live each day as a faithful disciple. And so as we cross the threshold of this new year, it is a perfect time to re-examine and re-evaluate our lives by asking, are we faithful disciples? How strong is our relationship with God? Do our thoughts and words and actions exemplify our Christian faith, and honor Christ? And, what will we resolve to do in the new year to become better disciples? Today we will have our own covenant renewal service. We will make our confessions, offer our Great Thanksgiving, make our personal covenant prayers to God, and then consecrate our covenant through Holy Communion. So let us now set our minds and hearts on what is holy and good and loving and right. To be close and intimate with God...isn’t this a wonderful way to start the New Year!

And so we start with our prayers of Confession. I will offer some words, and then there will be a time of silence for you to pray your own prayer, and then, as the slide shows, when you hear me say, “Hear our prayer,” you respond, “Have mercy on us, O Lord.”

Let us pray...

Litany

Holy and merciful God, as we reflect on our lives this past year, we confess that we have fallen short in our thoughts, words and actions, both by what we have done, and by what we have failed to do. We have fallen short because we have not put you first in our lives; instead we have put other things and other people before you, and thus separated ourselves from you. So we come this day to be forgiven and reconciled with you, so that we may begin afresh this new year.

Dear Lord, we confess that we have not always trusted you in all matters and all things in our lives. We have tried to take control, to manipulate people and things to fit what we want, what we think we need. We have not fully surrendered ourselves to you. Help us trust you more.

Hear our prayer...*Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

We confess that we have not loved those around us with the same love and concern we have for ourselves. We have not put ourselves in other's shoes. We have not forgiven certain people with the same mercy as you have forgiven us. We have not been willing to sacrifice and offer the help that was needed to make someone else's life better or easier...

Hear our prayer...*Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

We confess our pride, our hypocrisies, our apathy and indifference. We confess our self-indulgent appetites and ways, our love of worldly belongings, and our desire for approving looks....

Hear our prayer...*Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

We confess our intolerance, anger and impatience toward others. Our uncharitable thoughts, our quick and often false judgments, and our prejudice toward people of another race, religion, economic level, sexual orientation, lifestyle, those who are different from us.....

Hear our prayer...*Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

We confess our sins against our own physical bodies. Paul said our bodies are "temples of God", and we confess that through our habits, our appetites, our lack of exercise, we fail to care for our body, your temple as we should....

Hear our prayer...*Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

We confess our waste and pollution of your creation, our throw-away attitude, and our lack of concern for the generations, our children and grandchildren, who will come after us...

Hear our prayer...*Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

Forgive us and restore us, gracious Lord. For just as Christ died and was raised to new life, so may we die to our old ways and be raised into the newness of life in Christ. This we ask in his name, Amen.

The Great Thanksgiving

Personal Prayers for Covenant Renewal

We have made our confessions. We have offered our Great Thanksgiving for God's covenant with us. And now we will renew our commitment to God. We will pray through the prayer that John Wesley would use at his covenant services. As the lines of the prayer come on the slide, we will pray the line all together, and I will offer an additional prayer. Let us pray...

Lord, I no longer want to live for myself, but for you....

I don't want to be guided by selfish desires, or look out only for my own interests, or to use my money only for me, or to want control, or chase after the wrong things. I want to be more compassionate, more merciful, more generous toward others. My heart's desire is that my life would honor and please you.

Put me to whatever task you want me to do...

Lord, use me in new ways this year that will impact your kingdom. Challenge me to greater service. Call me to deeper discipleship. Whatever it is, make my life count for you.

Place me with whomever you want...

Lord, there may be somebody that needs my help. Even somebody who is different than me, someone who has conflicting values or lifestyle, who takes me outside my comfort level. Grant me your unconditional love, and use me.

Put me to doing...

Help me to use my time and energy to shine your light, share your love, and sacrifice myself to help others. Use my gifts and skills to build your kingdom in our community.

Put me to suffering...

Help me learn from the difficulties and trials I face, so that I will be a better, more Christ-like person. Use my sufferings to make me rely more on you. And help me to remember that even Jesus suffered, and you were able to bring good out of evil, and life out of death.

Let me be used for your purposes...

Help me to truly understand what it means to live out Christ's commission to "Go and make disciples." And use me.

Or let me get out of the way for you...

When I become an obstacle to others knowing you, when I don't speak or act the way I should, when others can't see Christ in me, convict me and stop me, so I don't bring dishonor to your name.

Let me be praised for you...

When I do right by you, and others see you by what I've done, then I will accept any acclaim I receive with grace and the full knowledge that it is only because of you that I can do anything at all.

Or let me be humbled for you...

When others do not acknowledge my work, or give me credit, or even say thank you, may I accept that with humility, knowing that it is only your opinion, your thoughts of me that really matter.

Let me be full...

Let me be filled with love and joy and peace and generosity this year, and, with the power of the Holy Spirit at work fully in my life.

Let me be empty...

Let me know that I am nothing in and of myself. Empty me of selfishness, pride, arrogance, laziness, indifference, cynicism. Empty me of all that is not you.

Let me have all things,

If you choose to grant me family, health, money, job, friends, material possessions, and more, then I am grateful, and I pray to take nothing for granted.

Let me have nothing...

If you choose that I am to be in need, or that things are taken away, then help me to remember that though I don't have much, I still have enough.

I freely and fully surrender my life to you – your will be done...

Jesus said, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." I give myself, my habits, my opinions, my attitudes, over to you. I want to glorify and praise you in all areas of my life. O Lord God, I want only what you want.

Now if you will take a moment to write down what God is calling you to do this year.

Holy Communion

Wesleyan Prayer

Lord, I no longer want to live for myself, but for you.

Put me to whatever task you want me to do.

Place me with whomever you want.

Put me to doing,

Put me to suffering,

Let me be used for your purposes, or let me get out of the way for you.

Let me be praised for you, or let me be humbled for you.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and fully surrender my life to you – your will be done.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it.

And the covenant that I have made here on earth this day with you, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.