

“RESOLUTIONS FOR THE NEW YEAR”  
Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-11, Matthew 25:31-46

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The Old Testament lesson is from the third chapter of Ecclesiastes:

*1 There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: 2 a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, 3 a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, 4 a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, 5 a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain, 6 a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, 7 a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, 8 a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace. 9 What does the worker gain from his toil? 10 I have seen the burden God has laid on men. 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*

And from Matthew’s gospel, chapter 25, beginning at verse 31:

*31"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

*34"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*

*37"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'*

*40"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'*

*41"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'*

*44"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing*

*clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' 45"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'*

*46"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."*

This is New Year's Day, 2006. Happy New Year! If you were here the first Sunday of Advent you heard me also wishing you Happy New Year. But I said it in a different way: Happy New Year, Church because it was the beginning of the new liturgical year of the church which runs from the first Sunday of Advent through Christ the King Sunday and those Sundays vary according to the date when Christmas falls. We have all kinds of years like the fiscal year that runs from July 1 through June 30th. My insurance deductible year for my state insurance, I think, runs that way. But I found out, much to my sorrow, that my Medicare deductible year runs from January 1st through December 31st. And I was so proud of having met my Medicare deductible until someone burst my bubble and said, "It starts all over January 1st." Well, anyway we have all these years to keep up with and our liturgical year to follow here in our church to know what colors to have on the alter and stoles and whatnot.

The Chinese and Jewish peoples have a different calendar for their cultures and religious practices. This is only the seventh time in my lifetime of 65 years that Christmas Day and New Year's Day have been on Sunday. What a wonderful opportunity we have to worship on these Sundays.

New Year's Day is always a time of reflection on the old year just closed and the new year just begun. It is a time when some folks make resolutions to do things differently in the new year. Lots of different things come to mind in the new year that we can do that we can, or hope to do better than the year just closed. But whatever it is, we think about the things that we did in 2005 that we wish we had done differently and hope to do differently in 2006.

As this New Year has begun, we need to remind ourselves that we are a day or a year closer to our eternal destiny. We are one year closer to hearing one of two things: Either we will hear God say, "Come, ye blessed of my father. Inherit the kingdom." Or we will hear Him say, "Depart from me; I don't believe I recognize your face."

New Year's Eve is always a little poignant for me and I always get teary eyed when I hear the strains of "Auld Lang Syne." It's a little sad to remember the year past and all those angel faces we've loved and lost. And to think of all those opportunities to do good that we've passed up. Just how have we spent 2005, and just how will we spend our time in 2006?

There are twelve months a year—52 weeks; 365 days, unless Leap Year gives it that extra day; 8760 hours; 525,600 minutes; 31,536,000 seconds. Time is the most expensive thing we can spend. Once it is gone, it can never be reclaimed. How we spend our time is a reflection of our character. I read to you Ecclesiastes, chapter 3, *To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under Heaven . . . .*

Today I want us to look back at the year past for a moment and think about some questions, one of which is: Has our relationship with God, through Christ, improved over the year just closed?

Have we drawn closer to the Lord? The Bible says, in James, that if we draw near to God, he will draw near to us.

How do we draw near to God? Think about your friends, your very close friends. How do you get close to them? You spend time with them. We communicate with them either in person or over the phone or through email or snail mail, but we stay in contact with them. We draw near to them by communicating with them. We draw near to God by communicating with Him. We can communicate with God through reading His WORD, the Bible. How much time have we spent reading the WORD? Another year has gone by and have we read the Bible through? Have we read it at all? Jesus came to this earth to reveal God to us. *The WORD became flesh*, John said, *and dwelt among us*.

Before He came, people walked in darkness with only partial knowledge of God. Thomas said to him: *Show us the Father and we will be satisfied*. Jesus reply to Thomas was: *If you have seen me, you have seen the Father*.

As we read and study the WORD, we have the Father revealed to us. We absorb this WORD into our hearts and minds. We develop the mind of Christ. We become like Him!

Another question we need to think about today is this: Have we been steadfast in talking with God through prayer? Prayer, simply defined, is a conversation with God. We talk with Him as we would talk with our very best friend, as indeed He is our very best friend. A conversation is “talking WITH someone, not TO someone. We talk some and God listens. God talks some and we listen.

I don't necessarily mean that God speaks out loud to us. But rather He speaks through His WORD as we read and ponder what is said there. He speaks to us in the thoughts that Holy Spirit puts in our minds as we pray.

But you say, how do I know that it's God speaking to me and not something or someone else? You can be sure that the thoughts that come to you from God through Holy Spirit, will be thoughts that are in keeping with the pure and Holy nature and character of God. Anything less than that is not from God.

Any effective communication is a two-way street. Therefore, in order to have conversation with God, there must be fervent Bible Study coupled with fervent prayer. Which brings me to another question: Has our prayerfulness increased or decreased this year? One of the weaknesses in our Natural Church Development surveys indicated that we lacked “Passionate Spirituality” in this church. We need a renewal in our passion for the things of God. We need a transformation of the life and ministry of our church.

Lovett Weems says that we lack passionate spirituality in our churches probably because we are looking for the END without using the MEANS. The primary means by which God transforms the life and ministry of any church, Weems says, is through DISCIPLINED, LISTENING, OBE-DIENT PRAYER.

Disciplined Prayer: This means setting a time of prayer and keeping that vigil diligently. Don't let anything come between you and that time of prayer. Dr. Vance Heavener says that if we don't come apart to pray, we are going to come apart.

Listening Prayer: We talk and then we let God talk to us through His WORD. We can't hear what God has to say to us if we do all the talking. I like what my former Whitnel principal says. He says he talks to God for ten or fifteen minutes, first thing in the morning and then he listens to God the rest of the day.

Obedient Prayer means that we must be willing to become the answers to the prayers we pray.

We have been challenged in our Administrative Board meetings several times to pray for our church, to develop a prayer vigil for our church. And we are going to begin a prayer vigil next Sunday morning at 9:30 A. M. in the conference room. We invite anyone who wants to come to join this group in prayer for our church. We hope and pray that this group will grow so large that we will have to move elsewhere to accommodate it or to another time to have a longer time. We need to pray that God will give us a new vision in this church to move out beyond these four walls into our community, our district, our conference and into the world through deeds of love and mercy that are the building blocks of God's Kingdom on this earth, and as I prayed in the morning prayer, new visions, new deeds of love and mercy.

Another question we need to consider is this: Are we closer with each other as members of this church? Have we made an effort to get to know each other better or to get to know the members that we do not see or are not in Sunday School or Circle or something with? Again at one of the board meetings when we were discussing our fellowship in this church, someone suggested speaking to a "circle of ten"—ten people around you don't know very well; speaking to them; speaking to the visitors within our midst. The red carnations are given out so that you can recognize people who are not members of our church, who are visiting us and so that you can welcome them. And I might say here that when one of our membership experiences the loss of a loved one, we need to pay particular attention. Call that person; send a card; go to the receiving. Attend the memorial service, but call later to see how they are getting along and to inquire if they need anything, because I think sometimes we smother we people with attention right at the time of the death and the funeral and then a day or so later, nothing, when reality sets in and they really need attention.

St. Paul urged the Thessalonians Christians to do more and more in loving their sister and fellow Christians. We need to adopt that idea in our church. It doesn't matter if we don't know the people very well or if we don't know them at all. As members of this expression of God's Kingdom, they are still our sisters and brothers in the Lord, and as such, we need to love and support them in the time of their trouble, for we indeed are members one of another. We need to bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. And that law of Christ is that we love each other as Christ loved us.

Another question we need to consider as we review our life in 2005 is: Has our relationship with those in the world improved? As people of God, we have a responsibility for doing the

gospel wherever we are, to whomever has a need. I believe it was St. Francis of Assisi who said, "Preach the gospel at all times; use words only if you must."

The story of the Good Samaritan is a prime example of doing the gospel wherever there is a need. He was the only one who stopped and helped the man who was injured? It didn't matter to the Samaritan that this man wasn't the same nationality or culture or creed. What mattered was that the man was hurt; he had a need and the Samaritan had the means with which to help him. He didn't just give him a band aid or an aspirin and send him on his way. He bound up his wounds. He took the risk of being beaten and robbed himself and go down and bound up that man's wounds and put him on his donkey and took him into the next village and provided a place for him to stay until he got well. And told the inn keeper, "If I haven't given you enough money, I'll pay you the rest when I come back through."

As people of God, we have an important, urgent responsibility to those who have need of food and shelter and clothing, to those who are sick and in prison, to those strangers within our gates, to those who are lonely and afraid, to those who are illiterate. Did you hear the gospel lesson I read today? Did you hear Jesus' words that these sick, hungry, cold, thirsty, lonely, illiterate people are the least of His brethren and that whatever we do for them, we are doing for HIM?

In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus is talking about us being salt and light. He is speaking to His Disciples about the true nature of their calling—that they would be salt in a dreary, tasteless world, that they would be light along a darkened pathway, because of the one who came as the "light of the world."

We know that salt makes a difference in the flavor of our food. We know that it acts as a preservative. We know that if it loses its flavor and, as such, its preservative nature, it isn't good for anything but to be thrown out for gravel in the road as they did in Jesus' day, to be trampled on as people walked along.

Jesus told His Disciples that if they wanted to make a difference in the world, they would have to be different from the world. God would hold them accountable to maintain their salty usefulness.

And light? Who lights a candle and puts it under a bushel basket or under bucket? It doesn't do any good that way. But put it on a lamp stand and it gives light to the whole room.

As salt makes a difference in our food, so light makes a difference in our surroundings. Jesus said to His Disciples, "I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't be stumbling along through the darkness but will have the light of life."

Christ's disciples must live for Christ, shining like a city on a mountain, glowing for all to see. They are like lights in a dark world, showing clearly what Christ is like. Because Jesus is the light of the world, His followers must reflect His light. Being Christ's disciple means spreading His light to everyone, everywhere.

Spreading the light of Christ's love comes through the deeds of love and mercy that build up

God's Kingdom on this earth. People see those good deeds and give glory to the Father in Heaven.

Have we made progress in this year just closed in letting our light shine to all the world and not just our little corner of it? So. What in the world does this have to do with New Year's Day and the rest of the time we have? Well, my sisters and brothers, it has everything to do with New Year's Day and the rest of the time we have in 2006.

Today, now, we need to resolve to draw nearer to God through Christ by having a daily reading program of God's WORD. The Psalmist said: *Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. . . . I will hide its words in my heart that I might not sin against God.*

Paul told the Roman Christians that: *Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.* We need to keep our relationship with God through Christ alive and vital through diligent, listening, obedient prayer.

The Psalmist said: *At evening and at morning and at noon will I pray to God.*

Daniel of the Old Testament followed this habit of praying three times daily and this is a custom we could to adopt. Or better yet, we need to keep a running conversation with God all day long. Say, "Good morning, Lord. Here is my day."

And at night say, "Well, God, thank you for being with me all this day." And lay out the things you have to do before Him, all day long. He is willing to help you. He will see you through the day.

Some folks say that others have a "private line to God" that gets through better than most. But the truth is, that those who seem to have a "private line to God" don't have any more private line to God than anyone else! It's the way in which the privilege of prayer is appropriated in their lives. It all has to do with how that person keeps their relationship with God through Christ open and active through daily Bible reading and through disciplined listening, obedient prayer! You've got just as private line to God as anyone else. We need to draw closer to our sister and fellow church members. You remember what I said about the "circle of ten" people and how we should speak to everyone in the church, and particularly those people we don't know?

And you know, we have these wonderful church directories that aren't just a conversation piece on the coffee table in your living room. Their purpose is for us to get to know each other by sight. Get that directory out and look at the pictures and point out the ones that you don't know and then look for them on Sunday morning and greet them if you see them and if you don't see them go home and call them and say, "I missed you at church today."

Come to Faith Lift on Wednesday evenings and enjoy the fellowship and the food and the programs and look for people that you don't know there. That is an excellent way to get to know membership of the church. Join a United Women's United Circle, women. Join United Methodist Men, men. Join a Sunday School class—couples, individuals, young people, old people,

middle people. This is the way we get to know each other. This is the way we draw nearer to the membership of our church.

I said in my sermon on the first Sunday of Advent that we are ALL called to do the gospel. Some of us are called to more specialized ways such as preaching and pastoral ministry. But we are ALL called to be to the world what salt is to food: It hinders the spread of corruption; it creates thirst; it brings out flavor. As disciples of Christ and ministers of His gospel, we need to live in such a way that people hunger and thirst after the righteousness of God.

Jesus said: *I am the light of the world.* And then He said: *You are the light of the world.* He means that HE is the source of the light and that WE, Christian people, are REFLECTORS of that light. Just as the moon reflects the glory of the sun, so we are to reflect the glory of the God's SON, Jesus. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. It is elevated above its surrounding and it shines in the midst of darkness. Those lives that show traits of Christ's teaching cannot be hidden. A church that sits on a hill cannot be hidden. It is elevated above its surrounding and it shines in the midst of the darkness of its surroundings.

Like Jesus said, "It does no good to light a candle and put it under a bucket." In fact, if you light a candle and put it under a bucket it probably will go out because it needs oxygen for the flame to burn.

So we as Christian people must light our candle and let it burn by the daily Bible reading and prayer, diligent prayer, and by doing the deeds of love and mercy that are the building blocks of God's kingdom. We need to be about our Father's business in 2006, so that the beacon this church has been for the 160 years of its existence, can continue to shine even brighter and farther down the road. Jesus did not intend that we hoard the light of His love for ourselves, but that we share it with others whether they are across the street or across the state or across the world! The winsomeness of lives in which Christ is seen speaks louder than the persuasion of words.

I said in the beginning of this sermon that time is the most expensive thing we spend. When it is gone we can't reclaim it; it can't be recycled. I will say now that we usually can find the time to do what we really want to do.

We have 364 more days in this year of 2006 and I'm sure in the waning days of 2003 the people of southeastern Asia didn't know what was in store for them the day after Christmas last year. And in the waning days of 2004 the people of Louisiana and Mississippi and Alabama and out in the mid-west and California didn't know what was in store for them in 2005. If a crisis of those proportions were to happen to us in 2006, what kind of faith would you have to support you?

What kind of relationship do we have with the Lord today? How solid is the foundation of our faith—yours and mine? Will we be the salt and light this world needs or will we just be gravel for the road? It's an individual answer to that question. And in the light of that, let us stand and sing, "Take time to be Holy. Speak oft with our Lord."