

Jan. 10, 2021 "Resolution & Renewal"

It's a new year! Traditionally, we're supposed to make New Year's resolutions. What resolution could I offer? Spend less time at doctors' offices would be a good start...

We approach New Year's as a time to take stock of our year past and look ahead to what we hope to accomplish or become in the year dawning. A new year holds a promise: for our minds, bodies, hearts and souls, our very lives to be changed for good.

This is an opportunity to wash out old habits, take a fresh, new outlook. Once again, we can strive to become our better selves, try to live up to the favorable impressions our pets, children and grandchildren have of us; put on the cloak of love and light that God wants us to wrap ourselves and everyone around us in.

This year, I'm reflecting on my resolutions and promises given our society's violence and chaos, the ongoing pandemic, unemployment, hunger and homelessness, so many dreams and plans deferred or denied.

In our scripture this morning John the Baptist proclaims that the Messiah is coming to lead all of us; rich and poor, powerful and powerless, young and old, men and women. To usher in this new era we must wash away our old selves, embrace God's reconciling love and live forward in a way that increases justice and peace.

I believe this passage is one of the most important in the New Testament for what it means to my discipleship and Christianity. To accept Christ's call we need to be baptized, renewed in our relationship with God and each other; resolved to change our thinking and priorities here and now. Then we can move forward, doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our creator.

This is good news, great news! We can emerge into new life, a new time with a clean heart and a right spirit.

Purification through water rituals were important practices with Jews in Jesus' time for physical, mental and spiritual health. This practice was centuries old when John stood on the banks of the Jordan River. Baptism for renewal and repentance of sins has some roots in the Old Testament:

*Psalm 51·Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."*

John may have chosen the Jordan River for his baptismal cleansing ritual because of its historical and spiritual significance to the Israelites. After 40 years of wandering in deserts barren of water, they crossed the Jordan in a baptismal-like procession to enter the promised land of Israel. Renewed by water, the 12 Hebrew tribes took possession of this land with a mandate from God through Moses to found a new society instilled with justice and righteousness.

John returns to this important and holy place and invites the people to renew their covenant with God and each other. He also lifts up his prophetic voice to declare an uncomfortable and inconvenient truth: in the promised land of Israel, God's country, there is little justice, righteousness or peace.

John's baptisms offered everyone a fresh start, a new way to enter into life with God and each other. The people came in droves. The grace was free, but there were strings attached. Those who chose baptism would have to live forward into the renewed covenant that came with it.

John insisted that those who chose baptism had to change, live the values and principles their society was founded upon, not just talk about them. The cost of being renewed was, and is steep - working to upend injustice, neglect and oppression is as difficult a mandate to live by then as it is now.

John was righteously angry when those responsible for a lot of injustice and misery showed up wanting to be cleansed, too. He publicly called them out as hypocrites for believing their religion, traditions and belief they were God's chosen people granted them the grace of cleansing renewal while shielding them from responsibility for changing the system. Who we claim to be has to line up with who we are in our daily life.

Facing a world overrun with violence, oppression and greed beyond all need, most who came to John must have been discouraged, perhaps even hopeless that things could turn around for them, their country or the wider world. Wading into the Jordan as their ancestors did might have given the poor, oppressed and marginalized hope that they could start again, build a just and peaceful land for everyone even in the midst of a Roman occupation. John gave the people renewal and resolution to start over again.

We feel Christmas deeply each year. We go back to the manger and witness the birth of our salvation again, the beginning of a new relationship between God and us. Christmas arrives in us and through us each year, bringing joy, light and hope. Hope that was born in the midst of oppression, violence and injustice.

With hope reborn in us, even in times like the ones we are living in, we can go back to the river, wade in and emerge renewed and resolved to change our direction. Like the Israelites who came to John, we can remember our past but also declare that faith and grace call us to change our hearts, minds and souls to work for a peaceful and just future. Repentance in the New Testament was a Greek word, *metanoia*, which means to change our mind after we learn something new.

I need to say that encouraging renewal in our baptism causes me some trepidation. I don't want to suggest that anyone needs to be "born again" in their Christian faith as an adult, especially with all the theological, political and cultural baggage that being "born again" has come to stand for in 21<sup>st</sup> century American Protestant Christianity.

I'm also not preaching that being baptized insulates or immunizes us from evil, neglect, apathy or bigotry. Baptism isn't like a COVID vaccine. It won't magically change a person, that takes resolve. The Holy Spirit's renewing baptism is a fresh start but not a free pass.

Like the Israelites, we may come to the threshold of this new year wondering where we might find hope and renewal. For most Americans, this country has not lived up to our founding values and principles. We live in a time where violence, oppression and injustice surround us. We, too, need a renewal of our personal and communal covenant to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

I confess I don't know right now what my own path is as a renewed Christian should be. How can I resolve to live out my renewal faithfully? I haven't been oppressed

or marginalized in my own country. What resolutions should I make as a straight, white, well-off man in Edina? I can almost hear John the Baptist in the distance calling me out. I'm not sure I should be preaching this scripture. I want to hear the marginalized and oppressed, people of color, women, women of color, preach John the Baptist, call me to renew and resolve my covenant.

I struggle with where, when and how I can try to work for justice and peace, both in this community and the wider world. I can start by using my voice, my resources and my place to advocate and work for justice, equity and peace. I know I need to walk humbly, do justice and listen to those who have and are being oppressed.

I will find my way with both guidance from the Holy Spirit and your support and encouragement. Edina Morningside Church is my wonderful, faithful community that walks with me every day and each year.

From this scripture I see 3 guideposts for my renewal. First, I note that John channeled God's never-ending river of grace by baptizing everyone who came to him, including those he could've assumed were his enemies: Roman soldiers, tax collectors, the wealthy and powerful. Forgiveness of sins is universal, available to all equally, even those we might think aren't worthy. However, repentance is specific. John gives different guidance to people according to their position or context. I need to remember to suspend my judgement of others' repentance and try not to confuse righteousness with self-righteousness.

Second, John baptizes everyone **before** he baptizes Jesus. John doesn't wait for Jesus to come to begin his prophetic work. He gets on with justice-building, charging the baptized to work on bringing heaven a little closer to earth immediately. It is not enough for me to talk or think about justice-building. Getting on with the work of peace and justice here and now is a faithful response to my renewal.

Third, we are forever and always renewed by the Spirit, which breathes new life and power into us to work for peace, justice and love, no matter where or how we've been this recently. Our baptism, our resolution and renewal begin the work that started at Christmas, especially in times like these.

*The Work of Christmas - Howard Thurman*

*When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among others,  
To make music in the heart.*

In this new year may you make music in your heart, peace in your home and justice in the world beyond your door, renewed by the Holy Spirit and resolved to continue being a disciple, a follower of Christ. Amen and amen.