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1/1/2010, The Name of Jesus
Luke 2:15-21
In Praise of New Year's Resolutions

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²¹And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called *Jesus, the name given by the angel* before he was conceived in the womb. (Luke 2:21, RSV)

What I want in this new year stretching ahead us is that I will bear this good name - Jesus - with more integrity and devotion than ever before. I want that for you too. I am *Christ's* man, through Baptism. I do not want to claim his name in vain. You are Christ's man. You are Christ's woman. Let us not be his people in name only, but in truth and in life this coming year. That would be a good New Year's resolution for us, I do believe.

I've made a few New Year's resolutions in my day, and I've stuck with them. One of my most useful resolutions was to quit speeding in my car. I share in humanity's love of motion. There's a fire in my blood making my physically impatient. Always has been. I still suffer with it. Even now, when I'm getting older, I find myself restless on the sidewalk, for example, wanting the whole crowd to move faster. Again and again, I find myself murmuring, "If this fellow in front of me moves any slower, he's gonna topple over!" You know, as little children do when they are learning to ride a bicycle. If they go too slowly, then they topple over. It's only when they pick up some speed that their balance kicks in. Likewise, with slowpokes in front of me. If they move any slower, they are going to topple over. It would probably be a good New Year's resolution for me to stop murmuring that, and to try to slow down some.

Well, that's what I did when I was a young man. I made the definite decision to drive within the speed limit. If the limit was sixty, then I did sixty, and I let the rest of the world go zooming by me. I became content to live over in the right hand lane, trying to get out of the way of faster drivers so that they could speed on by. I did not condemn them for speeding. I just chose to a different path. And all things considered, I think that worked out well for me.

I'm trying a similar thing this year. My New Year's resolution this year is "to give each letter its due." I don't mean "letter" as in correspondence. I mean "letter" as in single letters, a, b, c, etc. I guess that's a pretty humble resolution. Still, if I can stick with it, I think it will be good for me. That same old fire in my blood makes me type too fast, and so I'm always having to backspace and correct typos and get it right. But that's not the worst of it. I have this worry sometimes that I am writing faster than I'm thinking. That can't be good. I've been inspired by an article I read recently about the Pulitzer Prize writer Cormac McCarthy. I

tend to agree with Ralph Ellison's praise:

McCarthy is a writer to be read, to be admired, and quite honestly - envied.

Well, I read an article recently about Cormac McCarthy's old Olivetti manual typewriter. I think I mentioned this before, the way he wrote twelve novels on that old typewriter, plus short stories, screen plays, and so on. I'm thinking that there might be a connection between the physical slowness of typing on a manual typewriter and the intense *thoughtfulness* of his writing. So, I am resolving to slow down my writing and to try to give each letter its due.

The problem is that New Year's resolutions need to be renewed *each day*. I lived by that resolution against speeding back when I was a young man. I lived with it for a year. And I think that in general it changed my outlook on life and made me a safer, more peaceful driver to this very day. And yet, if I'm not careful, I'm over there in the left lane, speeding along with other fast drivers. It would be nice if you could make a resolution, and that would seal the deal. But, alas, good resolutions sometimes need to be renewed. They need to be picked up again. They need to be returned to.

To my mind, one of the most dramatic passages in the Bible is Joshua's exhortation to Israel once they've reached the Promised Land. Joshua knew that his people were in surrounded by foreign ways, foreign gods, and foreign morals. He anticipated that the Israelites would be tempted by these ways of Canaan. So he gave his famous exhortation to them:

Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; *but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*" (Joshua 24:14-15, RSV)

What strength there is in Joshua's testimony: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD! Only, tomorrow comes. Tomorrow comes, when the great public gathering is dispersed, the dramatic speech is spoken and done, and Joshua is left in the quietness of day by day to live in the grand and holy way he has declared. Each day he faces the question whether he means serve the Lord that day. Indeed, each moment he faces the same question. He made a good resolution. We cannot do better here on the happy edge of a new year. He has pledged to serve the Lord. But now he must do it, day by day.

In Luther's *Small Catechism*, Luther gives a lovely and powerful statement of what baptism means for daily life. Many Lutherans know it by memory:

¹⁰ What does such baptizing with water signify?

¹² Answer: It signifies that the old Adam in us, together with all sins and evil lusts, should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God's presence.

One way to think of this is that when we are baptized, we take on our greatest New Year's resolution: to slay sin within us, through daily sorrow and repentance, and to rise up a new person in Christ.

Luther knew, however, that not all baptisms work out this way. Even in pious medieval Germany, there were parents who politely had their children baptized, but then failed to raise those children in the faith of the church. And so, through their parents' unfaithfulness, the children did not strive to slay sin and to become righteous because they did not even know that that was their appointed path in life.

Furthermore, till Christ's kingdom comes, there is the perpetual reality that sometimes we enter upon a good resolution, but then fall short of it. So, Luther deals with the question of re-baptism. If one has been baptized, but failed to do what baptism requires, should one be re-baptized? Luther's answer is plain and sensible:

Therefore, I say, if you did not believe before, then believe afterward and confess, "The Baptism indeed was right, but unfortunately I did not receive it rightly."

I hope to talk more about this next Sunday, for the festival of the Baptism of Our Lord. But for now, on this first day of the year of our Lord 2010, let this be enough of an application: If you have never made a New Year's Resolution, or if you have made many of them, but failed, today is a new day. And tomorrow is a new day. And it is high time to turn to good resolutions with increased earnestness.

Let that sweet verse from Godspell be our theme for 2010:

Day by day	To see thee more clearly
Day by day	Love thee more dearly
Oh Dear Lord	Follow thee more nearly
Three things I pray	Day by day

I know a young man who is the happiest man of earth. If you were eager to meet the world's happiest man, I could take you and introduce him to you. He is so very happy because his wedding day draws near.

I mention this to remind us that life *deserves* some good new year resolutions. Married love, parenthood, vocation, being a neighbor, being a citizen of humanity, receiving so very much from Jesus: these are all good occasions for shaking off dull sloth and sin and returning again to the righteousness we first pledged

ourselves to when we were baptized.

After all, we follow a Saviour who fulfilled his good resolution day by day. He wracked up the days, one by one. Indeed, he lived his entire life not falling short on any good resolution. He accomplished what we should have accomplished, but too often fall short.

But the great and happy thing is that we are free to follow Christ in such purity and devotion for the day now stretching before us. And for tomorrow too. And if we should fail, they sunrise brings us a new chance to do what we should have been doing all along: to see Jesus more clearly, to love him more dearly, and to follow him more nearly, day be day, to the benefit of our neighbors and to his glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.