

“A FRESH RESOLUTE FAITH,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, November 27, 2022

This morning there are no corks popping, nor any noise-makers shrieking in the air. No one is even wearing a funny hat. Nevertheless, it is a New Year for us all.

Of course, by our secular calendar, running from January to December, the New Year doesn't start until January 1. But by long tradition our Christian churches get a jump on everybody else by celebrating the new year on the Sunday of Advent, which falls four weeks before Christmas either on the last Sunday of November, as it does today, or on the first Sunday of December. This first Advent Sunday begins a whole new cycle of religious seasons for the Christian churches which carries us as Jesus' faithful disciples through Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost—right back to Advent again.

At New Year's, it used to be rather common custom for the religious and non-religious alike to make resolutions is an effort to turn over a new leaf and live in more positive and healthy ways. Unfortunately, an awful lot of folks have become jaded about the whole idea, even treating it as a running joke. In lieu of any quest for self-improvement, the reigning attitude now seems to be “Just accept me as I am--like it or not.” Beyond and beneath such lip, there seems to be a general erosion of belief that we can change and emerge as better people.

I'd be the first to acknowledge that our aspirational resolutions don't always work out as we hope and intend. When it comes to resolutions any of us can find ourselves in the same predicament of the American writer and sage Mark Twain who struggled to overcome a bad smoking habit that was ruining his health. His angst led him waggishly quip: “It's easy to stop smoking. I've done it hundreds of times!”

Yet our frustrations and failures in staying true to New Year's resolutions with the goal of turning over a new leaf doesn't make the act of resolutions silly. First of all, resolution-making can be a very Christian thing to do. It goes hand-in-hand with the whole idea of repentance whereby we commit ourselves to turn away from all that is negative, hateful, and destructive and embrace what is positive, loving, and faithful for our sake and the benefit of others. Indeed, resolution-making affirms our unique God-given ability as men and women to make free will choices and decisions that in God's grace and with God's help can re-chart our lives for the good.

Secondly, I suspect that if each of us look back on our lives we can find instances where resolutions really have worked, bearing fruit, making our everyday lives better and—from the perspective of those dear to us--helping us become more fit to live with. Accordingly, on this first Advent Sunday, which is our Christian New Year, it's a very good time us to

take stock in these past successes, which can be instructive should we choose—as I hope we will—to make some fresh resolutions for our road ahead.

I would be the first to admit there is a certain measure of mystery in the ultimate success of resolutions we undertake. It's not always completely clear why we prevail with certain resolutions but fail with others. Yet in spite of all that might mystify us, there are, I think, certain things that we can do to better ensure that we succeed with resolutions vowed. Let me cite just a few things that could help.

First and foremost, when we go making resolutions, it's important to be sure that we really want what we say we want. We really need to want whatever profess to want. In fact, no Advent and New Year's resolution stands a ghost of a chance if we're just talking through our hat and aren't committed to accomplishing bona-fide change. Even up front we can test our commitment by asking ourselves a simple question. Namely, what kind of personal sacrifices are we prepared to make to achieve our Advent-New Year's resolution and goal? Put another way, what are we willing to relinquish and give up in order to be blessed with success?

Secondly, the road to every successful Advent-New Year's resolution is always paved with temptations to go astray or backslide. Having positive strategies in mind to resist such temptations and to develop healthy new habits is critical. Yet equally valuable are the support of family and friends who know what we are trying to accomplish and ready to encourage us in our efforts to turn over a new leaf. All too often resolutions fail because we make them secret and keep them private. We end up battling temptations to stray all alone with no one to cheer us on or help us keep accountable to our avowed goals. On the one hand, it is best not to talk to those who might sabotage us with their negativism and skepticism. On the other hand, it can be valuable to confide in those who are sympathetic and disposed to lend us their moral support as we seek to make changes and develop better habits. The positive reinforcement of family and friends, as well as others we seek out who are similarly struggling with our issue can make a world of difference, increasing our chances of success.

Finally, in steeling ourselves to carry through with an Advent-New Year's resolution, have we talked to God lately? If something is so important to us that we feel compelled to make a resolution about it, then God wants to hear about it too. It's a wise man or woman who takes their resolution to God in prayer so that God can get in on the action with us, lending his own hand of help and an unmatched grace. Significantly, every major self-help group in America from Alcoholics Anonymous to Overeater's Anonymous calls upon its members to invoke God's help by sharing our problem with him. Without getting bogged down in theological discussions, these groups make clear that our

accountability before God and God's help are crucial ingredients in the life-saving, life-giving changes we seek to make.

We shouldn't be embarrassed about taking our resolution to God and asking for his divine blessing. As a general rule, as made so clear by Jesus' ministry, what matters to us matters to God. At the same time, if we are embarrassed by our resolution, perhaps we need to reevaluate what we are asking of ourselves and God. Maybe it is unworthy of us. In resolution-making, selfishness is never a virtue. And we shouldn't pretend otherwise. In such cases, we in fact may need to look anew at who we are and who we want to be and the kind of resolution that will help enable us to get there. Through prayer we may want to converse and consult with God until we get our ideals and goals right with mere superficiality giving way to real substance in our hopes and dreams for our own lives.

Yes, with God's help, coupled with the support of family, friends, and fellow habit-changers our desire to turn over a new leaf can triumph. We can overcome whatever inertia, laziness, or fear which are keeping us from being the better people God always intended us to be. Proof positive of the good things that can happen through heart-felt resolutions is found in the countless and compelling success stories of committed, faithful men and women who have defeated terrible habits that had long torn their lives apart. Through the grace of God and the dint of resolute commitment all kinds of addictions have been defeated, overcoming alcoholism, drug abuse, dangerous obesity, sexuality infidelity, and much, much more.

Any worthwhile resolution we may at Advent-New Year's is worth being resolute about. If we don't immediately succeed with our resolution, how important it is to keep trying until we do. Perseverance matters and is a Christian virtue.

God provides us with the best possible example of perseverance. Way back in the time of Noah God resolved to set creation right again after the sinful fall of Adam and Eve and their descendants. The entire Old Testament is the story of God's repeated efforts to put humankind back on track by means of prophets whom he sends to proclaim anew his Word. These efforts fail or are frustrated. But as our morning lesson from the Gospel of John attests, God's resolve never dissolves. At last, through the life, death and resurrection of his son Jesus, whose birth we celebrate in just a few weeks, God finds the ultimate answer and solution needed to redeem the world. (*John 1:1-5*)

If our powerful God is not ashamed to struggle on behalf of a resolution he made, why should we be? Our willingness to struggle and persevere with a resolution to be better Christians through our role as parent, spouse, neighbor, or citizen can make all the difference in the world for me and for others whose lives we touch. Since God wants us to all lead healthy lives, Advent-New Year's resolutions to take better care of ourselves physically, emotionally, and spiritually deserve our energy and effort too.

In this Advent season, which is New Year's for us, let us not be timid and shy about making resolutions. Setting all cynicism and skepticism aside, let us recommit and re-dedicate ourselves as Christians to become better people. Advent means "beginning." The new season of Advent can be a new beginning for us if we, leaning on the support of friends and the help of God, persevere with the New Year resolutions we do make. May we all give our best to the opportunities which a New Year offers. Happy New Year!
Amen.