

Resolutions: What of the Lord?

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Text: 1Samuel 2:20

“The LORD give you children by this woman for the loan which she lent to the LORD.” ~Eli

Cyndi and I watched the movie *Julie and Julia* over the holiday. There is one particularly touching scene when the actress Meryl Streep playing Julia Child learns in a letter that her sister will have a child. She turns her head and then rests it on her husband’s chest. Nothing is said, except in tears, “I’m so happy for her.” But the audience feels the sadness of that moment. Julia Child and her husband Paul never had children. When I read the 1Samuel lesson today, that moment in the movie came to mind.

Though her husband Elkanah loved her more his second wife, Hannah was unable to conceive a child and this devastated her. Hannah turned to the church of her day, the Temple in Shiloh. She went to pray alone, but the old priest Eli was there and witnessed the woman’s grief as she prayed. “If you will loan me a child, I will lend him back to you,” was her prayer.¹

One of the things we notice about this story of Hannah and her son Samuel’s birth is that it involves a resolution of sorts, and this is the week of everyone’s making resolutions. More often our resolutions concern losing extra tonnage or quitting a particularly bad habit. I wonder if any of us make our resolutions in tears to God as Hannah did? Of if God has anything to do with our keeping our resolutions?

I remember another story—this some twenty years ago. I lived in Maine at the time. One of my brothers called me on a Saturday night and told me he was joining the University Christian Church in Fort Worth the next morning. We had both had the same church upbringing and I knew he believed. Still, it was an odd enough outburst to make me ask, “*What’s come over you?*” He had loved and lost in marriage and made and lost a lot of money in the oil business by that point in his life. He said to me, “*I’ve just decided I can’t do this alone anymore.*” He has managed to keep that promise foremost in his life since that day, I’m grateful to tell you. However, he probably did not know then how many more times he would need God close to him in the intervening years. That is the way life is and, happily, also the way the Lord is.

There is something else about making resolutions. Charting a new course is almost always brought about by examining something missing in your past life. We think back about what we might make better if we choose a new course. What were the moments in 2009 when we had a special moment of perspective, what the Bible calls an epiphany, when God helped us see something more clearly? It would be a happy thing to have more moments of wisdom. What

¹ 1Samuel 1:12, 28 and 2:20. Hannah begged or borrowed (the same word in Hebrew) her son from God, so she lent him back to God, by whose grace the child was granted.

about the relationship to God to such moments of insight? Do the relationship and the results of our relationship with God improve with our connection to the church?

A church member wrote a letter to the editor of his newspaper and complained it seemed to make no sense to go to church every Sunday. "I've gone faithfully for thirty years now," he wrote, "and in that time I have heard something like three thousand sermons. But for the life of me, I can't remember a single one of them. So I think I may be wasting my time and preachers are wasting their breath giving sermons." This started a debate in the letters to the editor section over the next few weeks until finally someone wrote this clincher:

I've been married for thirty years now. In that time my wife has cooked some thirty-two thousand meals. For the life of me, I cannot remember the entire menu for a single one of those meals. But I do know this: they all nourished me and gave me the strength I needed to do my work. If my wife had not given me those meals, I would be dead today. Likewise, if I had not gone to church for nourishment, I would be spiritually dead today.

There is a reason we come to church. Not only does the practice sustain us by teaching us the wisdom of prophets and apostles in scripture, but when we spend time with God's friends, we are supported in our attempts to live better and walk the pilgrim way. Someone told me at a New Year's Eve party on Thursday night that that day marked thirty years of sobriety for him. I'm sure were he speaking to us this morning, he would tell us he could not have made it without the support of his AA and church friends. We also need help to live the Christian way. As my brother said, "I've just decided I can't do it alone anymore." We need not only God, but one another to make the right choices, to keep the faith, to walk the walk.

I had a great aunt and uncle in my family who always filled their pew at the First Christian Church in Bonham, Texas every Sunday when I was a boy. You don't find folks like that much anymore. People *choose* to fill their Sundays with other things. Once when First Christian had a less than stellar preacher, everyone in the family gossiped about this hapless fellow's limp sermons. Yet my great aunt and uncle were still there, week after week. I asked them why since his sermons were not up to par. My great uncle told me, "David, the sermon is not the only thing you go to church for. There is communion or a hymn or the prayer time or just being with other Christians. I always find something that makes me a better person for having come, regardless of the inspiration quota of the sermon." Doesn't Glen Ridge Congregational Church need more people like them?

Still, Christians come to church not so much for what it does for us, but for two more important reasons. Yes, we find ourselves helped when we meet in church and pray. But that is not the main point. The first reason is to honor God. The second is to help our neighbors, many of whom at any given time may need our support and help. What better place to meet them and help them than in and through the church? So if you did not make a resolution this week for the New Year, I think several have been suggested this morning! May God help us to dare and be better disciples in the New Year.

End

Resolutions.DOC