

Sunday, January 8, 2006 – 9 & 11 AM
Patchogue Church of the Nazarene

New Year's Resolution

Mark 1:1-11

Well Christmas 2005 is officially over. I took my house lights down last Monday to prepare for an oil delivery. When the boys were young, we would drive around the neighborhoods looking at all the different ways people lit their homes and property for Christmas. Some keep to a sacred or religious theme, but most just seem to try to light the world single handedly. I grew up for the most part in North Bellmore and there was a house in Merrick, I think, on Jerusalem Ave., that was the talk of Nassau County. Every year this house had a new addition to the light and figurine display. After several years of additions, crowds began to form just to look at the tons of stuff this person had going on. On Christmas Eve the owner would dress up like Santa and hand out candy canes to the small children who came with their families to look. Cars were lined up and down this main road on both sides of the street to spend some time in awe at the sight of this menagerie of lights and figures. I think the CFO of LILCO couldn't wait for this time of year. My dad worked for ABC News at the time and asked if a crew could go and check this place out. It appeared on the Eye Witness News show giving it even more exposure. But what was it all for? Even if one of the scenes might have been a Nativity (which I don't remember seeing there), what was the real event at this crazy house? It wasn't the birth of the "Savior, which is Christ the Lord" as Luke puts it. It wasn't the announcement of the "Messiah, Immanuel, God with Us," as Matthew puts it. It was, as most of the magnificent light shows we see on houses, a celebration of human making.

Where did all this come from anyway? I know the birth of Jesus is critically important to us all. Prophets like Isaiah and Zechariah predicted His coming and even predicted the place of His arrival. God came to earth as one of us to dwell for a little while as a human being and fulfilled the role He was destined to fulfill for our benefit and our salvation. But where did we get this whole Christmas story from in the first place? When we think of Christmas from a true Christian perspective, we draw our information from the Gospels in the New Testament. We know that the first three Gospels are called synoptic because they tell the same story from three different perspectives, but they are generally saying the same thing. The Gospel of John is recognized as a totally different thing from the other three. We also know that it is speculated that Matthew and Luke used Mark's Gospel as one of their sources in the writing of their versions. So then, one would think that they all start off the same way. None of these authors were there at the birth of Jesus. Matthew was a disciple called by the Lord in the beginning of His public ministry – he was Levi, a tax collector. Luke was a physician and came on the scene much later. Mark was most likely the very young man who followed Jesus and then joined Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. The most likely apostle to write an accurate birth story would be John since he was commissioned by Jesus to care for Mary after the crucifixion. He doesn't even tell about any of this in his gospel story.

Since Matthew and Luke used other sources in addition to Mark's early Gospel, they must have been made aware of the story of Jesus conception and birth some other way. They chose to write about this great event in history, and so we have taken their stories and embellished them over centuries to create our version of the celebration of Jesus' birth. So we have celebrated the story of Jesus' birth, and now we are into the New Year. I would like to look at a little different beginning of the Jesus story than we just celebrated. Don't you ever think about why things are done the way they are, or why several people choose to tell a story from the point they choose? Well our entire Christmas story is based on Matthew and Luke's Gospels, while Mark chose a totally different starting point – why? Each man has their own story to tell, with a specific point to their story. I've told you before that Mark writes an action packed gospel. He gets right to the point and keeps the momentum going

all the way through his relatively short writing. Let's look at what Mark decides is the most important way to start his gospel.

Now, let's look at Mark 1:1-11 and see what Mark considers the beginning of **his** Jesus story.

READ Mark 1:1-8 – NIV

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

**"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way"-**

"a voice of one calling in the desert,

**'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'"**

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Mark begins his Gospel by talking about an unknown character to the Christmas story. John the Baptist comes on the scene when Jesus begins His public ministry at about 30 years old. However, we learn from Luke's Gospel that John is born to Elizabeth and Zechariah, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit from birth. We know from Old Testament history that God filled particular people at particular times for particular tasks with the Holy Spirit so they can carry out the will of God. So we see that the Holy Spirit is involved in the beginning of the story of Jesus, and well He should be. Another story of beginnings is found in Genesis, the book of beginnings – in fact the name of the book in Hebrew is Berashit – “beginnings.”

READ Gen. 1:1-5 – NIV

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning--the first day.

In this story of the beginning of creation we find that God sends His Spirit upon the earth to bring order to the chaos of the waters and darkness. The Holy Spirit continues to bring order and peace to the chaos of life.

When we think of New Year's – we think of resolutions and new beginnings. It is an opportunity to start over again in many areas of our lives. However, we seldom make good on our New Year's Resolutions for very long. Whether it's quitting smoking, quitting drinking, or trying to be a nicer person, a more loving parent, or a better student, we seldom have the discipline and consistency to actually see our resolutions through for more than a few weeks.

John the Baptist preached a powerful message to the Jews calling them to repentance. His message was a call to recognize their condition before God and to repent – turn away from – the things of their past life and come to God. Baptism was an outward sign of their response to God's call to

repentance. The Greek word for repent – *metanoia* – which means “*a complete change of one’s mind.*” It means that we should recognize our iniquity and seek forgiveness from God for our sins by completely changing our mind about the old thing and turning toward God.

Baptism was not a Christian created ritual. It came from the Jewish traditions. John the Baptist did not come up with baptism out of his own head. If we look back into the historical origins we can find evidence that the Jewish or Hebrew people would sometimes baptize new converts to the Jewish faith in a river as a sign of spiritual cleansing. In fact, many times, if there were not enough men to form a synagogue, the Jewish believers would have a place of prayer near a river or other body of water. This was in case someone would come by and believe in the God of Israel, they could be symbolically cleansed in the waters and join the group of God-fearers.

But – John’s baptism was different. He was not baptizing converts into the Jewish faith. He was baptizing Jewish believers into a new way of life. He was teaching a way whereby people could turn from their old way of life and redirect their lives toward God. His teaching was anointed by the Holy Spirit, and was evident because many Jews came from all around to John to be baptized.

READ – Mark 1:9-11 – NIV

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

John said that One was coming who was greater than he was. However anointed and powerful the message of John was that caused many to come to him to be baptized in repentance, there was One more anointed by God who was to come after him. Even though John was filled with the Holy Spirit from birth, there was One who was about to come onto the scene that was more powerful, more anointed than he. In fact, the One who was to come was God’s very Son. This was confirmed at Jesus’ baptism by the voice from Heaven that said, “*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*” Isn’t it amazing that Mark uses these words to describe Jesus at his baptism? He used the same phrase in the beginning of his Gospel too. Vs. 1 says, “*The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*” Mark’s gospel almost ends with the same words from a Roman centurion in v. 15:39 – “*surely this is the Son of God.*” This is a literary term called an “inclusio.” It is a device where the author begins and ends a portion of the writing or the entire writing with a particular phrase that announces the theme of the writing. In Mark’s case, he is about to write a story that will build on the theme that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that’s good news. He builds his points to show the Jews who Jesus really is, the Messiah anointed with power from on high, yet it is a Roman (Gentile) soldier who “gets it” at the end. Recognition of who Jesus really is is available to anyone, Jew and Gentile alike. And whoever acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God and turns in repentance to Him, will never be the same again.

So, what is a “*resolution*?” According to the dictionary, “*resolution*” has many meanings, but the one that is applicable here is: ***a determination of the will.*** We determine to do or not do things all the time, but New Year’s is the main time for resolutions. New Year’s is a time for new beginnings. New beginnings can be a very humbling thing. Many times when we start over or plan a new beginning, it may be because we realize that the old or existing way is not very good. We have a “change of mind” that motivates a change in our actions. It is a humbling time.

I would like to briefly make three points about resolution.

Spiritual Resolution is about repentance, confession, and transformation.

Resolution is about: Repentance

There can be no real repentance or change of mind without humility. Jesus, the Son of God, went to John to be baptized in humility and obedience to the Father. Imagine how John felt? Here was Jesus, the One who John was not worthy to untie His sandals, coming to him like everyone else to be baptized with the baptism of repentance. What did Jesus have to repent for – He was sinless – perfect – the Son of God.

When He came up out of the water, the heavens opened – confirming to John that this was the One. We have a glimpse of the trinity in this scene too. Here is Jesus, the Son, humble and wet, the voice of the Father from Heaven declaring that this is the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus in appearance like a dove. All three members of the Godhead are on the scene. The next time we hear a confirmation that Jesus is the Son of God will be at the crucifixion by the Roman soldier, as I mentioned earlier. Jesus may not have needed to repent of sin, but He did need to bend to the will of the Father.

Have you lived up to all God wants of you this year? If you humbly consider your spiritual life, is it all it could be? - All it should be? Can you come to God in humility and admit your short-comings? *“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God”* - (Rom. 3:23a). New Year’s is a time of new beginnings. After Jesus’ baptism, he began his public ministry – a new beginning for Him.

Resolution is about: Confession

In order to start anew – to live new lives and adopt new habits – we need to humble ourselves, repent, and confess our past errors. Making new resolutions is a way of admitting that we didn’t measure up to what we wanted. We must confess that we didn’t lose that weight, or we’re still doing that same old thing we used to. We must admit, confess, that we are or were too weak to fulfill that promise to ourselves. We want to do better; we have to do better; we will do better - this year. We’ll start over and resolve that in 2006, we will be successful. It’s a New Year. This will be my year of victory. The problem is these are human attempts to change our lives. We do our best to change things in our own strength, but after a few weeks, the old habits and ways win out, and we cave in to the flesh and forfeit our goals for another year.

John’s baptism was not much different from people making resolutions, although it was more spiritually motivated. John was filled with the Holy Spirit from birth. He was anointed by God to preach a message of repentance, and many responded to his preaching and were baptized. Even though he dunked them in the water that symbolized their spiritual cleansing and their commitment to turn and follow God, they soon reverted back, just as we do in our resolutions each year. John knew his ministry was temporary and really just a preparation for the One who was able to affect a real spiritual change upon humanity. This One, who was about to come after him, would baptize, not simply with water, but with the Spirit of God.

Resolution is about: Transformation

The Holy Spirit is far more powerful than human resolve. As we read, the Holy Spirit moved over the waters of chaos in the beginning of the universe. When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit was there and descended “upon him like a dove.” Jesus was anointed by the Spirit and did powerful things that showed that He is the Son of God.

After He ascended, on Pentecost, He sent the Holy Spirit upon all who would believe in Him. Today when we turn in repentance from sin to God through Jesus Christ, we are transformed by the Holy Spirit who is given to us to confirm the true change that has occurred by faith in the Son of God.

Sin is something that we will always wrestle with in this life, and we will even succumb to it at times. Our human resolve is weak as we can see by the annual renewal of resolutions we try to make. If we are really honest, repentance is a daily practice rather than only at each New Year.

We will never be transformed by our own strength alone. Even Paul struggled as he documents in

Rom. 7:15-20 NLT -

I don't understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do the very thing I hate. I know perfectly well that what I am doing is wrong, and my bad conscience shows that I agree that the law is good. But I can't help myself, because it is sin inside me that makes me do these evil things.

I know I am rotten through and through so far as my old sinful nature is concerned. No matter which way I turn, I can't make myself do right. I want to, but I can't. When I want to do good, I don't. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. But if I am doing what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing it; the sin within me is doing it.

Something greater is needed – the power of the Holy Spirit. A ritual of baptism is not enough. A desire to live for God and change your ways is not enough. We need the holy Spirit who Jesus promises to all who put their trust and faith in Him in order to be transformed – radically changed for God's pleasure. Listen to what happened when Paul went to Ephesus in Acts. 19:1-5 – NLT ...

Acts 19:1-5

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior provinces. Finally, he came to Ephesus, where he found several believers. "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" he asked them.

"No," they replied, "we don't know what you mean. We haven't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

"Then what baptism did you experience?" he asked. And they replied, "The baptism of John." Paul said, "John's baptism was to demonstrate a desire to turn from sin and turn to God. John himself told the people to believe in Jesus, the one John said would come later."

As soon as they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Luke tells us that they were then filled with the Holy Spirit in a wonderful way. They heard and responded to John's message, and they were baptized with water. They resolved to repent from their old ways just the way we do every New Year. They resolved to confess their past sins and ask God's forgiveness. But that's as far as they went (or knew to go), so they were not transformed by the power of God by His Holy Spirit. Once they were told and understood the real message was to believe in Jesus, they were immediately baptized with the Holy Spirit and power - Power to live a Godly life that is continually but gradually being transformed by the Holy Spirit into the intended image of God. We may blow it here and there, but there is a compelling drive within us to be more like Jesus that is brought about by the Holy Spirit. This is what makes the spiritual transformation so much more than resolution. God doesn't require us to repent from sin without providing the means to become new creatures and start over.

"In Jesus' baptism, He was fully identified with us as human creature. In our baptism, we become fully identified with Him." He gives us the capacity to love God and live for Him, and He gives us the compassion toward others so we can love them as He would through us.

Aren't you tired of making resolutions that fall away ineffective? The only New Year's Resolution that will really make a difference in your life is the one commitment you can make to Jesus Christ

and allow Him to baptize you with His Holy Spirit and power. John was right – One who is mightier than any human person has come to bring new life in the Spirit and forgiveness of sins. Baptized not in water but in this new life in Christ, we are transformed and desire to live as God's people.

What will your New Year's Resolution for 2006 be? Do you want to try one more year in your own strength to overcome the things in your life you know are wrong? Wouldn't you rather give it all to God and allow the holy Spirit to transform your life to be Godly?

What are you waiting for? It's the New Year! A time for new beginnings – for starting over - is upon us.

Gloria Pitzer wrote:

Procrastination is my sin,
It brings me pain and sorrow.
I know that I should stop it,
In fact I will – tomorrow. ¹

What are you waiting for? God will not impose Himself on you or against your will. You must make the first move toward God.

C.S. Lewis puts it this way:

“God has made it a rule for Himself that He won't alter people's character by force. He can and will alter them – but only if people will let Him.” ²

1 – Gloria Pitzer – Quote Unquote, Chariot Victor Publishing, 1997

2 – C.S. Lewis – God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics, Grand Rapids, Eerdmann's 1970