

“Designated as Holy”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson Isaiah 61:10-62:3
New Testament Lesson Luke 2:22-35, 39-40

“Dr. Charles W. Eliot was the president of Harvard University in the 1880s. In the spring of 1885, a humble-looking couple from California showed up in his office. The only reason he agreed to see them was because the man had recently been elected to the U.S. Senate (which is quite a credential today but in those days, California was not a very important state, particularly to someone of Dr. Eliot’s status leading a prestigious East Coast university like Harvard).

Leland and Jane told Dr. Eliot that their only son had died of typhoid fever a year earlier. It had been the young man's dream to attend Harvard University, so they wanted to build some type of a memorial to their son at the university. ‘What did you have in mind?’ asked Dr. Eliot. Leland responded saying, ‘Is there a building which is needed?’ Dr. Eliot sized them up as a kindly but naive couple. ‘It costs a great deal of money to build what we need,’ he said. ‘You may want to consider endowing a chair in honor of your son. I suggest that you go and talk to our academic dean.’ And with that the meeting was over; Dr. Eliot stood up.

But before leaving the president's office, Jane asked, ‘How much would it cost to duplicate this entire university in another part of the United States and endow it so that students would not have to pay tuition?’ Eliot was astounded by the question. After a moment, he said, ‘I suppose it would take \$5 million.’ Leland looked at Jane and said, ‘Well, Jane, we could manage that, couldn't we?’ Before Dr. Eliot could recover, the couple was gone.

Can you imagine how surprised Dr. Eliot was to find that a year later the couple had begun plans to start a university in California in honor of their son? Leland and Jane Stanford had donated their [entire] estate and \$20 million to endow (what is now Stanford University).

What would Harvard be like today if Charles Eliot had recognized the potential of that humble couple standing before him, just two parents who came to dedicate their son to a vision that was bigger than life?

What would the world be like today if more people recognized the potential of another precious child, the son of another humble couple who long-ago came to Jerusalem to dedicate their firstborn son to the Lord?

Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary brought Jesus “up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord,” as was the custom of their religion. “Every firstborn male (was to) be designated as holy to the Lord.” As they enter the temple, a man named Simeon see the child Jesus, and in Jesus he sees the promise of the Lord, he potential for great things, a bright, new future beyond the wildest dreams of anyone on earth.

Today is the first day of the year in 2012. New Year’s Day is a day or us that promises something new, a day that has great potential for a bright new future. Some of you have made New Year’s resolutions. And for some of us, our New Year’s resolutions are not so new.

Each year, whether we state them as resolutions or merely hold them in our hearts as a possibility, we all seek to do something a little differently, to achieve something that we’ve longed for all our lives: to be a better person, a better parent, a better student, better at saying “no” to overeating or too much alcohol or smoking cigarettes or maybe pot or sexual addictions, whatever it is that’s getting in the way of who you see yourself to be, who you dream of becoming. Or, maybe it’s not saying “no” but rather saying “yes,” “yes” to more exercise, yes” to starting a new hobby, “yes” to serving in your community. Again, it’s whatever it is that God is putting in your heart right now that you know would make a difference in your life and the lives of those you love and care for.

It's not always on New Year's Day, but sometime in life, we all feel called to making a change for the better. And more often than not, we find it difficult to achieve. We're just not sure of how to go about it, what goals to set and how to achieve them.

The boss in the comic strip "Dilbert" says, "Our goal this year is zero disabling injuries. Last year our goal was 26 disabling injuries. In retrospect, that was a mistake. We had to injure nine employees to meet (that) goal." Anything worth achieving takes something of us to achieve it. The trick is knowing what to do AND what not to do.

In the time of Mary and Joseph, those seeking a new start in life would go to the temple. They would go to God, seek God's blessing and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They would undertake a ritual that put the past in the past and helped them to bring into the present something they hoped for, something they longed to have in the future. And to attain it, this required some the sacrifice – in Mary and Joseph's case a pair of turtle-doves or two pigeons. It was a ritual involved a certain action that would give life today to what they hoped for in all their tomorrows.

And likewise for us, we can't expect to get what we hope for – to achieve what God is calling us to – if we're not willing to make some type of sacrifice in attaining it.

The story of Jesus' birth and his dedication to the Lord is one of sacrifice, sacrifice that leads to a fresh start. And while we are each called to make sacrifices in life for the better, we are not left to do so all on our own. We are guided by God in what we should do and when we should do it, as well as in what we should not do, and how we can refrain from doing that.

One day, long ago, I quit smoking. Twenty-three years, four month, and 24 days ago, to be precise. And it required some sacrifice. Things had to change in my life. I had to give up certain actions and take on new actions. And the only thing that made this possible for me is that I wasn't in it alone.

Like Simeon who was guided by the Holy Spirit to enter the temple at just the right time and approach just the right family with just the right child, I, too, had some help and some guidance in preparing for the future that awaited me, a future of better health and God willing a longer life as a non-smoker. The help and guidance came in the form of a series of circumstances and the inspiration to use what God had put in my life for the better.

In addition to having my workplace go smoke-free, I had just moved in with a roommate who didn't smoke, AND gotten a new girlfriend who didn't smoke. But there was something more. I was somehow guided to do one other thing that made all the difference in the world. I chose a special day. I chose a date that would be meaningful, a date that I knew wouldn't come around again. I chose Aug. 8, 1988; and for me at that time in my life it became a sacred day— a day set aside for a special purpose, a day that was not like any other.

Each time I wanted to pick up a cigarette, I realized that I would be giving up something special, something that could never be recaptured. If I started back smoking, I realized I'd have to wait till 9/9/99 to try again. So I wasn't about to give up on 8/8/88.

That was my day. A day dedicated to a new, healthier and happier life, a day dedicated to freedom from the past. And if any of you have been or currently are smokers who want to quit or drinkers, or if you have any bad habits you'd like to give up or good habits you'd like to take on, you know it's not easy; it's not something we can do on our own.

Anything worth achieving in life takes sacrifice, yes, but it also takes inspiration, guidance and strength – the inspiration of God, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the strength of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I encourage you, in the weeks ahead, to be mindful of what God is calling you to give up or to take on in your life. What is it that would bring you closer to being the person God created you to be, living the life God desires for you? Think of that one thing, right now. Just be mindful of it, hold it in your heart and in your mind as a possibility. And then watch for how God will open up a pathway for you to achieve it.

Once upon a time, several members of a Jewish temple became hopelessly lost in a dense forest after wandering aimlessly for hours they were delighted when they unexpectedly came upon their rabbi who was also wandering through the woods. "Teacher," they said, "we are lost! Please show us the way out of the forest." The rabbi replied, "I don't know the way out either, but I do know which paths lead nowhere. I will show you the ways that won't work, and then perhaps together we can discover the ones that do." My guess is that God has already shown you the ways that won't work in achieving whatever it is that's eluding you in life. But that's in the past, and today is a new day. We don't have to return to our old pathways and patterns of life when we leave here today.

Today is the first day of a new year, a day unlike any other. And tomorrow, tomorrow is also unique in itself, brimming with possibility.

Whatever it is that you aspire to become, whatever it is that you feel called to give up or take on in life, God has given you this day if not another day to come as a sacred day in which to find the way forward; receive and accept a message from God on which way to go in life. Be mindful of that – let us all be mindful of that – holding in our hearts and in our minds in the days and weeks to come whatever it is that God is calling us to, right now, whatever it is that God is calling you to; hold that in your heart of hearts. And then, look for God to place in your life the means of achieving it.

For God has already given you everything you need in life to achieving your fullest potential and to show us the way to our potential. God has given us God himself, Jesus Christ, born in a lowly state with unimaginable possibility for a new and bright future for youand for me. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER FOR THE New Year

O Renewer of life, we as the church celebrate new life throughout the Christian year-at Advent, at Easter, at Baptism. The world joins us in celebration at the turn of the calendar. We are thankful for new beginnings for us and for the world.

Bless all that has gone behind us and all that will go before us – that we might be a blessing in your plan for the future. May our true resolution be that of more faithful prayer, quieter listening, and a desire to do your will.

Let this past year for us O God, depart in its own peace. Let it become a part of the centuries past, and let us give thanks that we were privileged to live in it.

As we turn the page on our calendars, and remember to add a new date to our checks and letters, move with us, O God. Stay close by.

Let us remember you as the source of our years and all our days. Help us to let go of any guilt we feel, to release any regrets we carry, to turn away from any wrong we encounter or cause. Help us to make what amends we can, and go forward, with you.

Lift our hearts in hope and expectation, O Lord, that you are out ahead of us, in both time and space, ready to guide us in a more faithful and life-giving way.

We especially pray for your guidance and provision for the congregation of Westport Presbyterian Church, for their pastor and the community they serve. Help them to see a way forward from this devastating fire; a pathway that serves you and brings glory to your name. And guide us in whatever way we can be of help and support, if only in prayer and fellowship.

For you have shown us, O God, the way to life eternal and peace universal. You have given us your own son, Jesus Christ, who in turn has led us back to you. So we join our hearts and voice in prayer at this time, using words that you taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen

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