

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"2009: A Year of Surprising Growth"  
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The last week of the year often is like the runners of a long distance race seeing the tape at the end of the course. The finish line is near and so they strain with all they have to make it to the end. Some of us take these few days off and reflect on our lives, wondering what resolutions we might make for the New Year. Others simply celebrate and think very little of change.

But for those of us who do like to think that we can resolve to do something different in the New Year, let me make some suggestions. As we think back on the year, with the help of all the media reminding us of things we have forgotten in the news, we begin to challenge ourselves anew in the areas that most of us struggle. We begin to consider resolving that we will eat in a more healthy way. Or perhaps we will exercise in a way appropriate to our health and age. Or perhaps we will limit our television, computer or video game times. Or perhaps we determine to change our spending patterns, or drinking habits or how wisely we spend our time.

The New Year is a time to look at our relationships, a time to wonder when we might make the time for what we often say is the most important part of our lives. But work gets in the way. Social commitments and activities get in the way. And as soon as the end of January or maybe mid-February comes, many of us realize that much of what we thought we could do to change was just not there. Was it the will power? Was it the resolve? Do we even want to change? Are we able to change?

These are all key questions for looking again at the New Year custom of making resolutions. As the years fly by and as we look into the mirror to greet someone different again, we realize that we are dealing with internal realities, not just another work project. Some of the issues we have struggled with consistently for years may still be there. What is this telling us?

The quick message is that we need help to change. Serious life changing change usually does not happen by accident, at least the changes that we want to make. The stewardship of our bodies, which no one else can take responsibility for, the stewardship of our time, which is ours alone to

manage, the stewardship of our relationships, which although it involves more than ourselves, we still are the only ones who can say “yes” and “no” to the other; all these major items often get overlooked in the rush to manage other parts of our lives.

The tyranny of the urgent, as one person put it, tends to railroad all other attempts at change. We often say our health and our relationships are of very high priority, but what would those close to us say about these areas of our lives?

And then there are our spiritual commitments: All year long I talk in my prayers about our choices in relationship to God. Do we highly value the book God has given us by choosing to regularly read it? Do we highly value the relationship with God that we have by speaking to God, and growing in our understanding and experience of prayer? Beyond Scripture and prayer, do we reach out to those who are needy in the community? Do we grow in our ability to communicate the faith that we do have?

All these reflections on physical, spiritual, emotional, social and intellectual growth are meant to say simply that God is not finished with us yet and that if we want to change, we can. Now this may sound a contradiction to everything that I have been saying to this point. But let me suggest to you that the change you seek you cannot arrive at on your own.

You need the community to help you. You need to have God to initiate and to give grace and mercy to even begin to want to change appropriately. Some Christians believe that all we need is God and Jesus to change us, but this is incorrect. The Lord has given us the church, the body of believers to help us discover who we are, why we are here, and move forward in the areas of lives that seem to continually have blockages and failures.

This is why I constantly am referring to relationship with God, but I also encourage relationship with others. We have been given both for a reason. And although we don't blurt out all our biggest faults and sins to everyone we meet, nevertheless, it is so important to have trusted ones to whom we can speak frankly, earnestly and vulnerably. These trusted ones become our true community, the ones with whom God can change our lives. God can make advances in the areas of our lives that we may even have given up on.

People see us and our faults more than I think we know. If you're not sure in what areas you need help, in what areas you need to grow, some of these trusted ones will be able to let you know.

We go through developmental stages throughout our lives. We begin completely dependent on our parents or guardians who raise us. There is a picture of this in the Luke 2 passage of Jesus' young life after being born in a stable in a place not known to his parents. We see him in Jerusalem at the temple where the rabbis would have performed the circumcision, showing him to be a child of the covenant of God. During that time, Mary and Joseph encountered a number of strangers who had extraordinary things to say about the child. Simeon calls him "salvation," which is both what Jesus' name means and what he would do for us who trust him. Anna also sees in little Jesus as the redemption of Jerusalem, as a symbol of hope for all those who trust the God of Israel.

And Mary and Joseph, even though at this point have had a good few encounters with God and the miraculous, still seem surprised that Jesus is being pointed out by strangers as the center of God's plan, the culmination of all God had desired. So long before Jesus could even utter a word, God was uttering words over him.

We too have had many words spoken over us as babies too young to understand. Some of us have had words of blessings, others words of cursing, most of us have had both. All of us have made it through the totally dependent stage to the place where we can live independently and grow. Many of us who are not here live long enough to go back to the stage of complete physical dependence. Perhaps we need to reflect again on our neediness, and the fact that the community plays a bigger a part in our lives, first through our parents, then through those we choose to let into our lives, then to others we may not even know, whether professional or otherwise.

Through it all, we look forward to 2009, anticipating surprising growth, not because of financial markets improving, nor because of wonderful health or even because of our great confidence or will-power. No, it is because we choose to trust God, and when we take seriously his call to relationship and community, he takes us on a ride that is more than we can ask or imagine.

Let us pray.