

## January 1, 2012 - New Year's Day - Rededication to the Lord

It's fortunate that New Year's Day rarely falls on a Sunday. Many who stayed up last night to greet the New Year are in no condition to worship today. And then, of course there is football. New Year's Day is always a day of worship for the true football devotee. But here you and I are in the house of God.

It's the first Sunday of a new year – an opportunity to look back, and to look ahead – to look up.

Take just a minute to look back. We've have had more than our share of natural events. Here in Texas, a great drought. While it was hot and dry here, hundreds of miles north there was rain – too much rain and great floods.

The economy began to recover from the great recession – and then it faltered. Growth seemed to stall. Many suffered personally – the loss of a job and the frustrating search for new employment. Salaries are stagnant; opportunities seem limited.

For others there were health issues that seem to defy remedy and the death of dear loved ones sorely missed.

But when we look back, can we also see the Lord's grace and mercy at work? We can reflect on the blessings we've received – as individuals and families, as a congregation and even as a nation. The last of our troops have returned from Iraq. Despite the bitter impasse in Congress, some positive legislation was passed at the end of the session. As a church, we've seen many physical improvements – the driveway, the Narthex, the sanctuary. And we were encouraged by having a full church on Christmas Eve – the ushers had to bring in extra chairs before the service had begun. I'm sure if you reflect on the year, you can think of blessings you've received.

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We looked back. Now look ahead – look up.

As we begin a new year, we begin with faith that God does not leave it all up to us. It is not our primary task to make the New Year turn out right, to fix everything that was wrong with the Old Year.

We are all pilgrims but, by faith, we travel toward a promise of a new day, a better future, a future filled with hope. God has sent us His Son, Jesus who is the light for our path into the future. And that affirmation makes New Year a joyous rather than a depressing time. That faith is the bedrock upon which we build our response to everything that happens to us. By faith we change our impatience into patience, our resignation to resilience, our wavering into perseverance.

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Today's gospel recounts another step in Mary and Joseph's journey of faith. In obedience to the law of Moses, Mary and Joseph had bundled up their baby boy and made the day trip from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, to present their firstborn son to the Lord.

In **contrast** to the Christmas Eve reading, there are **no angels** --: *only the worshippers* who had come to the Temple that day.

And it was not her encounter with the temple priest that made the headlines that day. The priest performed the rite and handed the baby back to them. It was all over but the photographs when a stranger suddenly stepped into the picture.

Simeon shuffled up to the young couple, held out his arms and said, "*Excuse me, may I hold your baby?*"

She checked him out -- decided he was okay. Then Simeon took Jesus in his arms and said the most startling thing. "*Lord, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel*" (Lk 2:29-32).

It was such a beautiful thing to say that the early church turned it into a hymn, one that we'll still sing today after communion.

For Mary and Joseph, though, it was not just a song. It was a revelation about their son.

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After he blessed them, Simeon told Mary the rest of the truth. A bright light casts deep shadows. Jesus would force people to choose whether they really wanted to get close to God or not. He would expose those who did not, and they would do their best to get rid of him. *A sword would pierce her heart.*

While Mary was still reeling from that blow, she heard someone else talking out loud about her child - a woman this time, praising God for this precious baby boy. It was Anna the prophet who, Luke says, stayed in the temple, praying and fasting. Like a few of us who are always at church, puttering around somewhere, cleaning, watering the plants. When Anna looked at Jesus' face, she saw: the redemption of Israel, and the light of the world.

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Scripture assures us that Mary and Joseph were scrupulous in doing everything that God's law required. Perhaps that means you have something in common with them. Even though it's New Year's Day, when many believers will not make it to worship, you made the extra effort to be in God's house today. Like the Holy Family, you are doing what God requires, and are here to offer your praise and thanksgiving to God for the year that has past -- for blessings received. And today's gospel reminds us that God rewards faithfulness in His own time and His own way.

And just as Mary and Joseph went to God's house to dedicate their son to the Lord, so you have come to this temple to re-dedicate yourself to the Lord for another year. For today, we renew the vows of our baptism - again saying 'yes' to God's grace - and again declaring our trust in Christ our Savior for another year.

Mary and Joseph faced an uncertain future. They were away from their home in Nazareth. And in the temple, Anna and Simeon offered prophesies. What did they mean? What should they do next?

Like them to some degree our futures are uncertain. We will all have many decisions to make - choices between alternatives in this New Year.

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There are two options for our lives. One option is to be squeezed. We can allow our lives, our values, our attitudes, to be shaped and formed from the outside in by the forces of the world around us. The other option is to be transformed. Our lives can be remolded, reshaped, from the inside out by the breath of the Spirit of God.

If we let it, the world around us will squeeze us into its own mold -- into the mold of materialism. That's the belief, the assumption that everything that really matters in this life can be bought with money. It's the belief that I can have what I want; all I need is plastic.

If we let it, the world will squeeze us into the mold of self-centered amorality. That's the assumption that there is no objective standard of right or wrong, and that my behavior is determined solely on the basis of what satisfies me.

If we let it, the world will squeeze us into the mold of "squishy spirituality" -- "self-absorbed pop psychology, that rejects anything remotely smacking of authority . . . It is self-indulgent rather than self-sacrificial." The bottom line of most contemporary spirituality is "What's in it for me?"

If we let it, the world will shape our attitudes, our values, until it squeezes the life right out of us.

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold. Rather, let God remold your life from the inside out so that you may demonstrate in practice the good, acceptable, loving, life-giving will of God for you.

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*How do we do that – how do we let the Spirit of Christ mold and shape our lives from the inside out?*

Open your heart to the Spirit – open your mind to God's Word.

That implies practicing the disciples of the faith - being faithful in attending weekly worship and fellowship with other believers, committed to daily prayer and Bible reading.

In other words, "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?"

Letting Christ mold you means resisting temptation, and, whenever you fall into sin, repenting and returning to the Lord.

It means proclaiming Christ by word and example in your daily life - serving Christ by serving others, loving your neighbor as yourself.

All of that simply means promising that you will follow Jesus as your Lord and Savior in 2012.

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The poster in the Narthex says *Rebuild, Renew, Rejoice*.

In 2011 we rebuilt. Now 2012 is a year of renewal.

So we begin by renewing our commitment to the Lord Christ for 2012.

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Prayer

Lord, by your grace we have been given another new year. You lead us into the future, another tomorrow, fresh possibilities and potentialities.

Guide us through the coming days. Lead us into the future and help us see tomorrow not as a threat but a gift.

Lord give us a life that we could not have by our own efforts. Create among us newness beyond what we could make on our own. Begin some new great work among us, that we may live to the praise of your glory.