

# “The Resolution to End All Resolutions”

Luke 2:41-52



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**January 6, 2008**

Good morning everyone, and happy New Year on this first Sunday of the year 2008. So how did you celebrate the new year?

Maybe you spent the first minutes of the new year at a party with some close friends or family members. Maybe you spent it at home and watched for the zillionth time that great ball drop from the top of a building in Times Square. Maybe you couldn't stay up to celebrate the new year and celebrated it sound of sleep your own dreams.

And then the morning of January 1<sup>st</sup> arrived. The first day of the new year. My father always came down to breakfast and announced, "I'm so hungry, I feel like I haven't eaten since last year." January 1<sup>st</sup>, is the day to make resolutions to do things better in some way. It's fun to play around with all the brand new possibilities that open up to us on January 1<sup>st</sup>. For example, if you jog on January 1<sup>st</sup> you've exercised every day this year. If you get through lunch without potato chips or a candy bar, you have perfectly kept your diet this year.

Perhaps on January 1<sup>st</sup> you can honestly say that so far this year you never lost your temper, never yelled at the kids, never forgotten to floss, never thrown your dirty clothes on the bathroom floor, and never forgotten to read the Bible in the morning. On January 1<sup>st</sup> your whole life can be transformed. For one day at least, all your good intentions can be jump-started, and all your bad habits can be unplugged. At least for a few hours (or minutes), the year is a perfect reflection of your best self.

But January 1<sup>st</sup> is followed inevitably by January 2<sup>nd</sup> and January 3<sup>rd</sup>. Soon you will opt for staying in a cozy bed a few more minutes rather than plunging out into the cold on that jog. Pretty soon candy wrappers will start appearing in your desk drawer again. By the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup>, you will surely have been aggravated enough by a bad driver or a dropped glass or a stubbed toe to have let loose a blue streak of, if not of bad words, then unsanctified thoughts. By the 7<sup>th</sup>, your socks are back on the bathroom floor and your dental floss is gathering dust. By the 10<sup>th</sup> you fall asleep before you can even get the Bible open.

And yet, in spite of how difficult it sometimes is to keep our new year's resolutions there is something positive about this current flowing through our culture at this time of the year. People are seeking, making resolutions toward self improvement, even spiritual transformation. A recent survey of 300,000 people determined these as the top 10 most popular resolutions. (1) weight losst and get in shape (2) sticking to a budget (3) debt reduction (4) enjoying more quality time with family and friends (5) finding a spouse (6) stop smoking (7) get a better job/change careers (8) learn a new skill/hobby (9) volunteer and serve people (10) get more organized.

Researches also found that 40 to 45% of American adults make one or more resolutions each year. And after six months 46% of the people had actually kept their new year's resolutions. Researchers also found that a person who makes a New Year's resolution is 10 times more likely to attain that goal than someone who does not make a resolution and who desires that same goal.

And yet many of our New Year's resolutions get packed away with the last of the Christmas decorations. Soon our behavior and the whole New Year are just as tarnished as they were before January 1<sup>st</sup>.

The problem with most of our resolutions is that they are too safe, too sensible, and too self-centered. We resolve to make tiny cosmetic changes in our lifestyles, but refuse to consider restructuring our lives and changing the paradigms by which we live. Our Scripture reading today, Luke's story about the boy Jesus, offers us an example of what it would mean if we were to transform our lives by making the ultimate resolution, the mother of all New Year's resolutions, the resolution to end all resolutions, to declare like Jesus did, that from this day forward we will be "about God's, our Father's business."

Joseph and Mary, their friends, neighbors, and relatives, all made the required pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Pass-over feast. But as soon as the allotted time for the holiday was over, they hit the road—eager to get back to all the chores and responsibilities that filled their lives. Joseph, a craftsman working with stone and wood, undoubtedly had projects awaiting his attention. Mary would have had the hundreds of time-consuming tasks it took to keep her family fed and clothed. Like most of us at the end of an extended vacation, they were probably looking forward to getting back to the comfortable familiarity of their own hearth and home.

The scene Luke draws suggests that Joseph and Mary had made their pilgrimage with quite a substantial crowd of loved ones. As the caravan turned back towards Nazareth, the children would have moved back and forth among this crowd of family members and friends. Little wonder that Mary and Joseph assumed Jesus to be somewhere in the midst of the caravan's chaos and did not miss his presence until everyone stopped and settled in for the night. Immediately Joseph and Mary retraced their steps and trekked back to Jerusalem.

For some unstated reason, they apparently proceeded directly to the temple site, perhaps already suspecting that they would find Jesus there. Having once lost my own son, Adam, in a crowded mall in Sunriver, Oregon for over 45 minutes I can identify with Mary's panicky confrontation of Jesus. Her demand, "Why have you treated us like this?" insinuates that an intentional act of deception or betrayal may have motivated Jesus' action. Jesus' response shows that he is genuinely mystified and amazed at Mary's desperate relief and bottled up anger.

His response also reveals that he has now taken on for himself the responsibility of living up to his infant-dedication to God. His words, "I must be in my Father's house," demonstrates that even at the age of 12, Jesus clearly felt the call of God. Despite his newly-claimed identity of one who must be about God's business, Jesus accepts his role as a good, obedient son and follows his parents back to Nazareth.

But in this story Luke clearly puts Jesus's response to God's call up against his parent's desire to return home to their duties in Nazareth. It is clear that Luke is attempting to give us a taste of what this Jesus would soon be like. This young Jesus is already refusing to let his relationship with God be regulated according to some prearranged, culturally imposed schedule. Instead of going along with the return-to-business as usual attitude, Jesus is answering the most important call of all—to be about the Father's business.

This story forces us to ask, what would it mean if we were to act in a similar way? What would it mean to live, not according to human expectations or cultural patterns, but according to what God required of us? What does it mean to be about God's business, rather than other people's business? Jesus discovered at this early age that answering God's expectations can get you in trouble—even with your own family. In fact, focusing on God's business may put an unexpected crimp in the family business. "Business-as-usual" may not be the way God does business. And the world and the church may find that unnerving.

The ultimate New Year's resolution does not challenge us to cut fat grams, or quit smoking, or get to aerobics class twice a week. The ultimate resolution a Christian can make is to live in the light of divine intentions, not human intentions. The New Year's resolution to end all resolutions is to live under the umbrella of God's expectations and to make it my business and your business to be a part of God's business.

But this just begs a bigger question. What is God's business?

God's business is human transformation, and it is the transformation of the whole world. An electrical transformer takes high voltage and transforms it into energy that we can use in our everyday lives. Without a transformer, there could be no light in the darkness, no safety in the storm.

At Bethlehem, God came to us and gave us Jesus, who transforms in his life the love and power of God into the impulses of grace and hope that the world so desperately needs. That's what God's business of transformation is all about.

So what does a Christian who resolves to be a part of God's transforming work on January 1<sup>st</sup> do on January 2<sup>nd</sup>? There are two essential requirements: First, we must go deeply into the Word. And second, we must go widely into the world.

First, the Word. Jesus is called the Word of God. To go deeply into the Word means that we allow ourselves to be transformed, to become more and more like Jesus. When the young Jesus felt called to live beyond business-as-usual and answered the call of God's business, he first went to the temple. In other words, he steeped himself in the meanings and messages of God's Word. Knowing what God intends for men and women, learning what God has already said and done and promised for this world, knowing what Jesus said and did for us and all the world, is a necessary first step in the transformation process.

Second, the world. Being about God's business doesn't mean we do nothing but sit in the temple—in the church—all day long and discuss theology. Remember that while Jesus started out in the temple, he then followed Joseph and Mary, back out into the world. We cannot be a part of transforming the world unless we stand in its midst. That is the trouble with so many of our traditional New Year's resolutions. They never step outside the confines of our own self-centered existence.

So what if in addition to resolving to lose 10 pounds this year, you also resolved to eat according to a diet that could sustain the whole world? What if in addition to resolving to exercise physically every day you also resolved to exercise your spirit by grounding yourself in the great disciplines of the Christian faith, prayer, study of the Scriptures and weekly worship? What if instead of resolving to spend less time in front of the TV and more time reading some good books, you resolved to teach those struggling with illiteracy to read those books to you? What if in addition to resolving to spend more "quality time" with your family, you also resolved to take your whole family on a mission project once a month, or for a week long mission or even longer?

What if in addition to resolving to get out of debt you also resolved to give away a greater percentage of your income? Did you know that people who tithe, give 10% of their income, no matter what their income level, are far less likely to struggle with debt than those who give less of their income away? Interesting isn't it?

Resolving to be about God's business means being grounded in our relationship with God. And I can't think of a better way to strengthen our relationship with God than what we are going to do together in a few minutes, celebrating Holy Communion with our family of faith. None of us are perfect. None of us will be able to keep our New Year's resolutions perfectly. No, we will fail again and again. But that's why we need to come to communion. We need to be reminded that we are loved just as we are. We need to receive God's forgiveness and grace, and we need Christ to pick us up and get us going in the right direction again. Then we can be about God's business in the new year.

Some of you need something else this morning. Some of you have had a very difficult year. Perhaps you are still in the throes of an experience of deep loss and sorrow. Perhaps you are still reeling from a serious conflict with a member of your family. Perhaps you have had a terrible year financially and you are seriously worried about what the future holds for you. Before many of us can move into the new year with hope and peace we need healing, we need support and encouragement, we need to forgive and be forgiven. And so this morning we are going to provide an opportunity for healing and intercessory prayer. Don't pass up this opportunity to start the year with a clean slate, with a brand new hope, and with a peace that will sustain you through whatever the year ahead holds for you.

Your life, your commitment to the ultimate resolution, to be about your Father's business, can help the love of God through Christ transform this whole world. Today is the first Sunday of 2008. A fresh New Year lies unblemished before us. What will you resolve to be in the next week, and the next, and for the rest of your life?