

Shaped by Promises for a New Year

Isaiah 51:1-6 (NIV)

¹ "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; ² look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many. ³ The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing. ⁴ "Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: Instruction will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations. ⁵ My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm. ⁶ Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.

Although I don't really like talking about them, no doubt New Year's resolutions are on your brain. Maybe only thinking that New Year's resolutions are stupid and unachievable and you don't do them...but you still thought about them. Others of you are serious about your New Year's resolutions, that you have some goals and want to use the opportunity of a new year to try to achieve them. Maybe it's exercise or diet related. Maybe it's work life balance, saving up for retirement or making lasting memories with a vacation. Maybe it's God related, more time in his Word, to finally read the whole Bible, spend more time in Bible study, more time in community service to meet people that you can share your faith with. Me, I'm resolving to do more mission work in Logan and do this worship song / hymn input thing that you will hear more about this week and next.

These resolutions are basically plans, things that you are promising to yourself that you will do. The actions you take to live out these promises will shape you. If you're making promises, resolutions, about working out, that may change your morning wakeup routine. If it's a promise about your diet, this will shape how you grocery shop, look at food labels, cook, when you eat, how often you eat out. If it's about work balance life, this will shape how many hours you put in, maybe stopping when you otherwise wouldn't have. If it's about saving up for retirement or making memories with vacation, this will shape your budget and spending habits. If it's a promise about being more in God's Word, this may change your Sunday routine, your morning or evening or lunchtime routine. It may have you going out when you otherwise would stay in, to go be around people. Living according to promises, resolutions, will shape you and your life.

If you've attempted New Year's resolutions for any number of years, you know that about 25% of people quit their resolutions in the first week. About 50% quit by the first month. And only about 10% actually make good on their promises and shape their lives around them for the whole new year. Maybe the percentages are like this because we're an impatient society who wants immediate results and the standard 2 months to form a new habit takes too long. Maybe it's because that even when we make promises, to do things that will be beneficial to us – more diet and exercise, more work and recreation balance, more consuming of the Bread of Life through God's Word – life doesn't get easier. In fact, as we do what is good and right for us, life often gets harder.

Isaiah's words today are addressed to "you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD," (verse 1) aka believers, people who are actively striving to do good, to follow God's Word, who made resolutions, promises, in keeping with God's will. Yet, these Israelites are looking at the prospect of Jerusalem and their Temple being turned into a desert and a wasteland after the Babylonians come and destroy it all. They are being faithful to God, shaping their lives according to him, but it's looking kind of like God is not being faithful to them. Why make our lives harder with more setbacks if we are seeking you, Lord?

Is that why you are not making any resolutions this year, because you know that even when you pursue good things, God-pleasing things, things are still going to go wrong? That even when you do work out for weeks on end and change your diet, the weight is not coming off and your body is hurting worse than it has in longer than you can remember? That you can take more time away from work and yet you are still stressed? That you can save up for retirement or for the vacation and yet that satisfaction seems elusive. That you can spend more time in God's Word, more time in Bible studies, more time going to church, and yet you will still struggle with your faith, still not know everything about God, still not get anyone to come to church with you?

When we look at the lives of other believers, we find the same. It wasn't just the wicked unbelieving Israelites who lost their hometown, their place of worship, but also the faithful ones. Abraham and Sarah, patriarchs of the Christian faith, left all their family and their hometown behind when the Lord called them to a place without telling them exactly where they would end up and never had a permanent home throughout their lives. James, the half-brother of Jesus who wrote the letter that we read for our second

reading, was, according to tradition, thrown from the temple and then beaten or stoned to death for leading people to Jesus as their Messiah, their Savior.

The point of this is not to discourage you from making resolutions or promises. The point is to tell you that even when Christians make good, God-pleasing resolutions in line with his revealed will and shape their lives around them, things don't necessarily go well. And so the promises that shape our lives need to be based on God and his promises, because his promises come true.

This is what Isaiah is leading us to. "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many. The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing." (verses 1-3)

Yes, Abraham and Sarah made resolutions, promises to follow God and his will, no matter where it would lead, even through years without children. They could have given up on God. With the incident with Hagar, it looked like maybe they were, but they kept resolving to stick with God's promises. God waited 25 years, but then this old, barren couple, past childbearing years, who felt like a desert wasteland, had the son of the promise, Isaac. From Isaac you get Jacob. From Jacob, you get a whole great big nation of Israel, millions and millions of people still around today. With his powerful arm, God had compassion and came through on his promises to his people and turned Abraham's and Sarah's wasteland of a barren family into a fertile garden.

The faithful Israelites who pursued righteousness and sought the Lord experienced the tragedy of losing Jerusalem and the Temple. They could have quit on God then, but they didn't. God had made a promise. 70 years later, he made good on his promise and used his powerful arm in compassion to return them to the land he had promised to Abraham and Sarah. They rebuilt Jerusalem and the Temple. They resumed their worship foreshadowing the promised one who would come and bring them ultimate deliverance. They shaped their faith, their lives, on God's promises and eventually joy and gladness was found in Jerusalem and the Temple once again along with thanksgiving and the sound of singing.

How has God had compassion on you, working his powerful arm to keep his promises to you? He has given you daily bread, hasn't he? Maybe you had times of want. Maybe you had times when you didn't know where the next meal would come from or the lodging needed for another day and you thought about giving up on God, but God has provided for you every day of your life. Maybe you think of how much more greatly you are blessed with your job, with the recreation you get to do and the vacations you have taken. How many temptations has God helped you to run from or overcome? Yes, we focus on the ones we fall into, but how many more did he give us victory over? God always comes through for us.

The most important promise that God powerfully kept for you and me was giving us himself as our perfect substitute. By his compassion, God's one and only Son came into our world. He brought his righteousness, lived it for us, credited it to us through faith. He took on all our sins and satisfied God's justice by paying for them on the cross. So now we are made new. Our wasteland of sinful spirituality has been turning into the garden of the Lord, covered with his righteousness. When God makes promises, he's going to make good on them for you.

Our resolutions, our promises about diet and exercise, about work balance, about building up the retirement fund or making the memorable vacations, about our increased partaking of the Word of God or our sharing of our faith, may go badly. We wear out. We get tired. We might break our promises. So, instead of shaping our lives around promises that can fail, we do as God directs us through Isaiah. "Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail." (verse 6)

Like we heard in our second Bible reading from James chapter 4, we can't control our future, our health, our jobs, our relationships, our memories, our vacations, etc. But God is in control. We can plan on him. We can plan on his promises coming true. These are the promises that we want to shape our lives around. His promises mean that, no matter how long it takes, we will have joy and gladness, thanksgiving and the sound of singing in our future. Amen.